

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

The Power of Reconciliation

Colossians 1:21–23

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians. We are continuing our verse-by-verse study of this book in our series, "Preeminence." Last time, we examined the great Christ-hymn of Colossians 1:15–20. Paul inserted a song into the midst of his letter. And Paul now leverages that hymn for his statements in Colossians 1:21–23 to explore the power of reconciliation. This is our passage today—Colossians 1:21–23.¹

And speaking of that power, let me paint a picture for you. God is infinitely holy. Sin and taintedness are as far away from God as the east is from the west. And yet, we (human beings) are intrinsically unholy. We are the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We are broken, and we are sinful. Unholiness *isn't* just the air we breathe; it is *generated* inside of us due to our corrupted natures.

You might say, "That's not good, Pastor Tony."

No, it's not. And I haven't even said the half of it yet.

God is a righteous and good God. He cannot tolerate evil or sinfulness. He has to punish it. And when he looks on human beings who are unrighteous, ungodly, unholy... he rightly sees those who deserve his holy wrath. We *rightly* deserve punishment. We *rightly* deserve God's wrath. We *rightly* deserve hell for eternity. We have violated the principles and the goodness of an infinite God. We deserve infinite punishment.

"That's awful, Pastor Tony."

Yes, it is! And it gets worse. There is no way that we could ever overcome our sinful state and be reconciled to God by our own actions. Our actions cannot compensate for the evil that we've done. Our good works can't overcome the human depravity that we are born with. We are lost. We are doomed. We are goners; this is true. "Thank you for coming to church this morning! Have a great afternoon!"

"Is there anything else you have to say, Pastor Tony? Is there, maybe, any possible way for us to be reconciled with the God who created us?"

Yes, there is. But it doesn't depend upon you. **The only thing that you bring to your salvation is nothing, and if you bring anything other than nothing you are disqualified.**² As Rich Mullins sang many years ago, "On the road to salvation, I stick out my thumb, and he gives me a ride."

My thesis for this morning is pretty straightforward, and it's derived from Colossians 1:21–23. Here it is. You, as a lost and doomed sinner, are reconciled to the God of the universe only through faith in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the cross.³

No cross; no chance. No sacrifice; no salvation. No Redeemer; no reconciliation. No faith, no future. Everything hinges on the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and the work of reconciliation that he accomplished on the cross.⁴ Everything hinges on that!

¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 143: "In v. 23 Paul introduces—albeit somewhat obliquely—the central concern of the letter: to encourage the Colossian Christians to resist the blandishments of the false teachers and to continue to grow in their knowledge of Christ."

² Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 37: "Reconciliation to God is an explicitly one-sided process! He does virtually everything. All we have to do is respond."

³ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 61: "Man and God could never be reconciled unless God's wrath was appeased. The provision for that took place through Christ's sacrifice."

So let's talk today about reconciliation. Write this down as #1 in your notes. I want to give you four statements about reconciliation from Colossians 1:21–23.⁵ Here's the first.

Those reconciled to God the Father through Christ...

1) Admit their former alienation (1:21)

And speaking of reconciliation, let's go back to the Christ-hymn. Because Paul says in **verse 20**,²⁰ *and through him [Christ]*

As I told you last time, every pronoun in the Christ-hymn refers to Christ.

²⁰ *and through [Christ]⁶ to reconcile to himself all things,⁷ whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood⁸ of his cross.⁹*

Paul takes us on a wild ride in that Christ-hymn. We go from the cosmic creation of the world to the incarnation.¹⁰ We go from billions of stars and millions of galaxies created by Christ Jesus, the one who existed in eternity past with God the Father... we go from that... to the Son of God who took on flesh and lived among us. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in this incarnate Son of God. He is the head of the church. He is the firstborn from the dead. He is the Preeminent One!

And through him, **verse 20** says, he is reconciling all things to himself. **Christ Jesus is negotiating the peace agreement between God and man. But he's also the offended party. He's also the means of the settlement. His blood makes peace possible.**¹¹

And notice what **verse 20** says. Not only is he reconciling believers to himself, he's also reconciling the cosmos that he created. He's reconciling all things on earth and heaven making peace by his blood.

What this bespeaks is the brokenness and fallenness of this world that was brought about by the fall. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, they didn't just bring down evil upon themselves. They brought chaos into the cosmos. They brought down an avalanche of consequence on our world. And the

4 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 39: "While the Scriptures paint the darkest possibilities for man apart from Christ, they also give us the highest, noblest vision of man known to any religious conception anywhere!"

5 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 139: "In the Greek... we have one long sentence, whose main verb, a form of 'reconcile,' comes in v. 22a. Verse 21 identifies the people who receive this reconciling action; v. 22b tells us the purpose of the reconciliation; and v. 23 introduces the condition for the continuing efficacy of the reconciliation. The bare bones of the sentence therefore are: *you ... he reconciled ... to present you ... if you continue.*"

6 Identifying the pronouns of Colossians 1:21–23 is more difficult than Colossians 1:15–20. This can be seen in the conclusions of the following two commentators: Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 107: "In this context where the focus is consistently on Christ... the implied subject of an unspecified third person singular verb should be Christ himself." Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 141: "However we construe the debated syntax of v. 19, 'God' or 'God in all his fullness' is the one who reconciles *through* Christ; and this same pattern is found in all Paul's other references to reconciliation. Probably, then, God should be assumed to be the subject of *has reconciled* in v. 22." In light of Paul's intrinsic arguments concerning the deity of Christ and the trinitarian work of creation and salvation, the ambiguity here is not that surprising. Could Paul possibly be intending this ambiguity and leveraging it?

7 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 59: "Some have imagined all things to include fallen men and fallen angels, and on that basis have argued for universalism, the ultimate salvation of everyone. By so doing they overlook a fundamental rule of interpretation, the *analogia Scriptura*. That principle teaches that no passage of Scripture, properly interpreted, will contradict any other passage. When we let Scripture interpret Scripture, it is clear that by all things Paul means all things for whom reconciliation is possible."

8 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 62: "There is nothing mystical, however, about the blood of Christ. It saves us only in the sense that His death was the sacrificial death of the final Lamb. It was that death that reconciled us to God (Rom. 5:10)."

9 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 59: "There is a sense in which even fallen angels and unredeemed men will be reconciled to God for judgment—but only in the sense of submitting to Him for final sentencing. Their relationship to Him will change from that of enemies to that of the judged. They will be sentenced to hell, unable any longer to pollute God's creation. They will be stripped of their power and forced to bow in submission to God."

10 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 36: "Man is as profoundly alienated from God now as he has always been since the Fall (see Romans 3:9–18). Indeed, the whole of creation is in desperate need of reconciliation. It is toward this profound need that Paul has been moving us in our study of his letter to the Colossians, and which he now takes up."

11 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 63: "The literal blood of Christ ran into the dirt and dust, and nothing in Scripture hints that it now exists in any tangible or visible form. Communion wine does not change into blood. There is no way the actual blood of Christ could be applied to all of us. We must acknowledge at some point that the sprinkling with blood under the New Covenant is symbolic."

brokenness of our current world is not an arguable point. Of course, it's broken! The question is **(1)** how did it get that way? and **(2)** how does it get fixed?

The answer to the first question is the first Adam. The answer to the next question is the Second Adam. The first Adam broke our world with sin. The second Adam, Jesus, will restore it. He will reconcile it to himself. He will put the Devil and the demons and all his enemies into their proper place forever along with those who reject him. They will no longer run amok in our world. He will recreate a new heaven and a new earth (see **Rev 21–22**). All of creation will be restored. All of creation will be re-created.

Paul says elsewhere that all of creation is groaning for this.¹² Creation is waiting longingly for this work of reconciliation.¹³ That work has begun, but it hasn't yet been completed. It's been inaugurated but not consummated. And we are part of that work. We are reconciled to God as a downpayment on the full reconciliation of all things. That is coming!

But Paul makes clear here, that wasn't always the case. In other words, we haven't always been in a state of reconciliation with our God. Watch how the third person pronouns of the "he" and the "him" move to the second person "you" in **verse 21**.

²¹ And you,¹⁴

This is a plural "you." This is no longer part of the Christ-hymn. **Paul is now following up that song with a sermon... just like a preacher.**¹⁵

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,¹⁶

You were alienated from God.¹⁷ **You were on another planet!** Why? Because God cannot abide evil and evil deeds. And that's what you were apart from Christ. You were inundated with evil. You were born into evil. Your untransformed, wicked mind was intrinsically hostile to God.¹⁸

Speaking of alienated, when Alastair was little we were listening to an audio version of *Pilgrim's Progress*. (Which was great, by the way! Listen to it with your kids!).¹⁹ But there is a scene in that audio

12 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 57: "Sin destroyed the perfect harmony between creatures, and between all creation and the Creator. The creation was 'subjected to futility' (Rom. 8:20) and 'groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now' (Rom. 8:22)."

13 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 37: "Romans 8:19–22 tells us in sweeping terms that man's sin has subjected the creation to futility: 'The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' This is more than poetry. Creation actually does moan, but it will be brought back to its primal obedience—like it was before the Fall."

14 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 105: "The impression that 1:15–20 was in large measure a preformed unit that Paul and Timothy took over for their own purposes is strengthened by the way in which 1:21–23 seem deliberately to pick up the final theme of the hymn and to repeat and elaborate it, bringing the cosmic vision of the hymn (in third person) down to earth by relating it immediately to the readers. Hence the emphatic opening 'and you....'"

15 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 117: "Christological discussions are not simply theoretical speculations. The doctrine of Christ leads to doctrines of soteriology, sanctification, missions, and eschatology. The remaining sections of this letter will demonstrate how these doctrines find their roots in Christ."

16 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 140: "The Scriptures present human beings in their natural state as hostile to God because of their involvement in Adam's primal sin. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:21, 'their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.'"

17 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 106: "A genitive of separation is often expected after the verb 'alienated' (cf. Eph 2:12; 4:18). In light of the preceding verse, where reconciliation assumes the hostility between Creator and the created, "alienated" can only refer to alienation *from God*."

18 JOHANNES OECOLAMPADIUS: "Now for we who were aliens and outsiders, we are drawn in by our one Lord Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for us. It is like the parable of the prodigal son, where the father killed the fatted calf—only this signifies an even greater restored relationship." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 161.

19 John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: Retold for the Modern Listener*, read by Paul Michael, abridged audiobook (Carol Stream, IL: christianaudio, 2008).

book where those who are apart from Christ are described as aliens. And of course, this piqued our little boy's attention. "Aliens!" And he asked me, "Daddy, how can they be aliens?"

And I tried to explain it as best I could as a father of a youngster. I told him that it meant they were metaphorically from another country. They were from a different category than Christian and Faithful and the other pilgrims in the book.

And then I gave an example. We had these good friends from Croatia who would visit us at that time. And I told Alastair, "Yeah, in fact, Ben and Heidi, our friends, they are aliens." And when I told him that his eyes got about this big. And then, I said, "In fact, your mother used to be an alien." And then his eyes just about popped out of his head, as he came to terms with the fact that he himself was part alien. That was a rough day for my son.

What does it mean to be alienated from God? It means that we are separated from him. He is holy. We are unholy. God cannot abide unholiness. We are estranged from him. The Greek word is ἀπαλλοτριώω (apallotriōō). And this word is used by Paul elsewhere in Ephesians to talk about unbelievers: "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated [ἀπαλλοτριώω] from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph 4:18).

And you might say, "Yeah, yeah! Those unbelievers are in darkness and ignorance, alienated from God." But be careful now! That's not what Paul is saying in Colossians 1:21. He's not saying, "they are," but "you were." That was *your state* before reconciliation.²⁰

I told you a few weeks ago about the Romans Road, and how I previously used that for evangelism. And of course, there are many different ways to share Christ. There are different ways that Paul talks through the gospel in the NT.

When I was a kid, my pastor used what he called the ABCs of salvation. He would say, "If you want to come to Christ, you need to learn your ABCs: Admit, Believe, Confess." It's that simple. And the first part of that is Admit. You admit your status as a sinner before God.

You don't say, "God, I'm a good person. I'd be great on your team if you'd have me. Amen!" You don't say, "God, this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. I've got so much to offer you if you just put your faith in me!... If you would just *admit* your need for me!" You don't say that.

You say instead, "I'm a sinner. I have broken your laws. I can't save myself." You admit your sinfulness and your need for a Savior.

Paul says that you were once, hostile in mind,²¹ doing evil deeds,²²

The word for "hostile" here in verse 21 is the Greek ἐχθρός (*echthros*) which could be translated "enemy."²³ **You were an enemy to God before you were reconciled to him! Even when you were a child this was the case. Even if you grew up in a Christian home, that's the case before salvation. Even before you committed your first sin, that's the case.**²⁴

20 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 60: "That they had been reconciled was evidence enough that Christ was sufficient to reconcile men and women to God. Their reconciliation foreshadowed the ultimate reconciliation of the universe."

21 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 140: "This word refers not simply to the 'mind' as an organ of intellectual thought but to the 'mind-set,' or disposition of the person; cf. REB, 'enemies in heart and mind' (in the LXX, *dianoia* usually translates *lēb*, 'heart'). It is this basic mind-set of the non-Christian that is 'hostile' toward God."

22 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 116: "In labeling one's existence prior to Christ's act of reconciliation as 'hostile in mind' (v. 21), Paul reminds his audience that one can either remain faithful in Christ or fight against him."

23 HEINRICH BULLINGER: "It is indeed not enough to say, 'You were alienated,' but moreover, he adds 'you were also enemies to God in your minds.' This shows, in the end, the fount from which flow all words and deeds, all thoughts and deep corruptions—and just like an infection of poison, it is not possible to shed it save by death." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 160.

24 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 60: "Non-Christians are detached from God because of sin; there is no such thing as an 'innocent heathen.'"

This is the doctrine of original sin. You were born hostile in mind, doing evil deeds. You don't know any other way. See **Romans 5** for more on that (see **Ps 51:5**; **Rom 3:10–23**; **Rom 5:12–19**; **1 Cor 15:21–22**; **Eph 2:1–3**).

Sometimes I like to tease young parents about their kids. I'll say something like this, "Oh, so and so is so cute. She must have been born without a sin nature." "He must have been born without a sin nature." And I can see the look on parents' faces. "Are you serious, Pastor Tony? This kid's a sinner. Just like his father."

Sometimes I'll have these baptism interviews with people, and I'll ask them, "When did you get saved?" And occasionally, I'll get an answer like this, "Oh, I've *always* been a Christian."

"Oh! Well if you were born a Christian, then you were born without a sin nature. And you don't need to be baptized. So why are we even here?"

The truth of the matter is that we are all natural-born sinners. We don't have to learn how to sin. We already know how to do it. We are natural born enemies of God. God knew that. God responded to that with the cross. And that is the means of reconciling sinners.

Speaking of which, write this down as #2 in your notes. Those reconciled to God the Father through Christ admit their former alienation. Secondly, they...

2) **Rest** in Christ's finished work (1:22a)²⁵

Paul says in **verse 21**.

you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...²² he [Christ] has now reconciled²⁶ in his body of flesh²⁷ by his death,²⁸

The word "reconciled" here is the same as in **verse 20**. It's the Greek word ἀποκαταλλάσσω (*apokatallássō*). Great word— ἀποκαταλλάσσω! In fact, the shorter word καταλλάσσω (*katallássō*) means "to reconcile." Paul uses that word in the NT to describe similar ideas (see **Rom 5:10**; **2 Cor 5:18–20**; see also **1 Cor 7:11**). For example, he writes in **Romans 5:10**, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled (καταλλάσσω) to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled (καταλλάσσω), shall we be saved by his life."

But in **Colossians 1**, Paul doesn't say καταλλάσσω, he says ἀποκαταλλάσσω. We weren't just καταλλάσσω-d to God in Christ, we were ἀποκαταλλάσσω-d.²⁹ The ἀπο prefix adds emphasis to this finished work that Christ has accomplished for us.³⁰

25 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 106: "In such a decisive, final (eschatological) shift, the relative brightness and richness of life newly experienced 'in Christ' would naturally make the old days seem much darker and illuminate their character as alienation (cf. Phil. 3:7–8)."

26 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 61: "The question arises as to whether man is reconciled to God, or God to man. There is a sense in which both occur. Since 'the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God' (Rom. 8:7), and 'those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom. 8:8), reconciliation cannot take place until man is transformed."

27 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 107: "Elsewhere in Paul, 'flesh' (σάρξ) often refers to one's sinful nature (Col 2:13, 23; cf. Rom 6:19; 7:18, 25; Gal 5:13, 24). In this context, however, it is used without negative connotations and refers to Christ's physical existence."

28 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 64: "The critical element in salvation is the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf. The shedding of His blood was the visible manifestation of His life being poured out in sacrifice, and Scripture consistently uses the term 'shedding of blood' as a metonym for atoning death."

29 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 56: "Paul no doubt used this stronger term in Colossians as a counterattack against the false teachers. Because they held that Christ was merely another spirit being emanating from God, they also denied the possibility of man's being reconciled to God by Christ alone. In refuting that denial, Paul emphasizes that there is total, complete, and full reconciliation through the Lord Jesus."

30 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 102: "The act of reconciliation is described in the uniquely compounded verb ἀποκαταλλάσσω, which is used in literary Greek only here, in 1:22, and in Eph. 2:16 and was therefore quite possibly coined by Paul (F. Büchsel, *TDNT* 1.258). Like the simpler form, καταλλάσσω (Rom. 5:10; 1 Cor. 7:11; 2 Cor. 5:18–20), it presumes a state of estrangement or hostility."

And how did he accomplish it? How did Christ accomplish this? He accomplished it with his “body of flesh by his death.”³¹ Paul is repetitive to the point of redundancy here... “his body,” meaning his “flesh,” and if that wasn’t clear enough he specifies further... “his death!”³²

Maybe Paul needed to be redundant with the Colossians!³³ Maybe there were these teachers going around and saying, “Jesus wasn’t really enfleshed! Because the flesh is gross.³⁴ God would never take on flesh. And the flesh needs to be despised. That’s why we worship angels. That’s why we embrace asceticism. And someday we are going to float around without bodies forever in heaven and we will be unburdened by these disgusting, onerous bodies.”³⁵

And Paul is poking those teachers in the eye here by saying, “No, Jesus Christ reconciled us in his body... in his flesh... by his death! Take that you ridiculous false teachers!”³⁶ Yes, Jesus was in the flesh. To say otherwise is heresy (see 1 John 4:2–3).

And the force of that wasn’t just to poke the false teachers in the eye. It was to bring the Colossians to a place of awe and wonder. “Jesus did that for me! Jesus reconciled me in that way! Jesus took on flesh and died a gruesome death on the cross for me!”

By the way, that work of reconciliation is a past tense reality.³⁷ The Greek ἀποκατάλλασσω is in the aorist tense.³⁸ This is not something that we have to await for in the future. Like, “I hope when Jesus comes back, I’ll be reconciled to God (fingers crossed!).” No! If you have put your faith in Christ, reconciliation is a past tense reality. It’s the same as your justification. It’s the same as your salvation. It has happened!

And that’s why I say here, “Rest in Christ’s finished work.” Those reconciled to God the Father through Christ... rest in Christ’s finished work!

And speaking of past tense reality. Write this down as #3 in your notes. Those reconciled to God the Father through Christ also...

3) Stand cleansed before God (1:22b)

31 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 107: “The two words σάρξ and σῶμα are characteristically Pauline (each occurs more than ninety times in the letters attributed to Paul, more than 60% of the New Testament usage of these words). And they never appear linked together elsewhere in Paul simply because their ranges of meaning overlap to such an extent.”

32 JEROME: “The apostle, in his epistle to the Colossians, wishing to show that the body of Christ was made of flesh and was not spiritual and made of some gossamer, ethereal substance, said significantly, ‘And you, when you were sometime alienated from Christ and enemies of his spirit in evil works, he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death.’ ... If by *body* is meant flesh only, and the word is not ambiguous nor capable of diverse significations, it was quite superfluous to use both expressions—bodily and of flesh—as though body did not imply flesh.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 22.

33 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 142: “Why Paul has introduced the word, since ‘body’ (*sōma*) in itself would have seemed to carry this significance. The simplest explanation is that Paul wants clearly to differentiate his use of ‘body’ here from the previous occurrence of the word, where it is a metaphor for the church.”

34 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 108n7: “According to Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 5.19.6, Marcion did not include ‘of flesh’ in his reading of Col. 1:22 and took ‘his body’ to refer to the church.”

35 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 108–9: “The usage here, then, is unusual in that the unprecedented combination of these two terms looks almost tautologous... such an emphasis would have been a bulwark against any Gnostic tendencies that attempted to question the reality of Christ’s death: the firstborn of all creation attained his status as firstborn from the dead by experiencing the full reality of physical death.”

36 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 107: “‘In his body of flesh’ may point to the necessity of his incarnation, and ‘through death’ may point to the necessity of his atoning death.”

37 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 107: “As in 1:13, the aorist tense (‘has reconciled’) indicates the decisiveness of what happened on the cross, not the completion of the whole work of reconciliation (1:20).”

38 Aorist, active, indicative, third person, singular. This verb is active and third person singular, because Christ does the reconciling himself. The verb ἀποκατάλλασσω in 1:20 is aorist, active, infinitive, but again Christ is the actor, reconciling all things to himself.

What does Christ's work of reconciliation accomplish? Are we just more tolerable to God than we used to be? **Is it like reconciliation between nations in today's world. We sign a peace treaty publicly, but secretly both countries keep stockpiling weapons for the next outbreak of war.**

There's a weird moment of "reconciliation" in the OT when King David is "reconciled" to his son Absalom. If you know the story, you know, that Absalom murdered his brother Amnon for the rape of his sister Tamar (**2 Sam 13:1–29**). It's a sordid affair. And all of it came about after David's sinful behavior with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah in **2 Samuel 11**.

And after he murdered his brother, Absalom fled for his life. But after three years, Joab negotiated a peace, of sorts, between father and son (**2 Sam 14:1–20**). And Absalom was able to return to Jerusalem. But David wouldn't have anything to do with him. David wouldn't meet with him (**2 Sam 14:28**). The text doesn't really say why. But you can read between the lines and see that David was still bothered by Absalom's sinful actions towards his other son, Amnon.

Let me just state the obvious—our standing before God the Father isn't like that! And it's not because we aren't as bad as Absalom. We are! And it's not because God is a better Father in heaven than David was on earth. That's true. But that's not the reason we have right standing before God the Father.

The reason we can stand before God the Father with confidence is because our righteousness before him is not our own. It is an imputed righteousness.

Look again at **verse 22** and let's connect the dots here.

²² he [Christ] has now reconciled [you, who once were alienated] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present³⁹ you holy

"Me? holy? That's not me, Pastor Tony!"

Yes, it is.

and blameless⁴⁰

"Me? blameless? You got the wrong person!"

Yes! Blameless.

You are presented holy and blameless... "in Christ!"⁴¹ That's why I told you "in Christ" is the most important prepositional phrase in the book of **Colossians**.

In Christ... you are now able to be presented...

holy and blameless and above reproach before⁴² him,

Before "him" who? Before God the Father!

Now this could be Christ. In other words, Christ could be the Presenter and the one to who we are presented. That's possible. And some commentators argue for that.

But that's not typically the way in which this "presentation" activity takes place in the NT. The way that Paul and others usually speak of this is Christ as our advocate before God the Father.

For example, **1 John 2:1** says that "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Also, **1 Peter 3:18** says, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." The author of **Hebrews** writes as follows, "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made

39 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 108: "In LXX, the verb 'to present' (παραστήσαι) is often used in reference to human beings standing before God (cf. Deut 18:5, 7; 21:5; Job 1:6; 2:1; Jer 42:19 [LXX; Eng. 35:19]; Dan 7:10, 13). In Paul, this verb can point to either one's present status before God (Rom 6:16, 19; 12:1) or one's standing before him during the time of the final judgment (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 4:14)."

40 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 143: "'Holy' and 'without blemish' are each used in the Old Testament to refer to sacrifices, and some interpreters think that sacrificial imagery might be found in our passage also."

41 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 108: "The essence of this verse is well expressed through the mouth of a different biblical author: 'we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy' (Heb 10:10, 14). Both authors, while not denying the present reality of sinful struggle, emphasize the power and finality of Jesus' atoning death."

42 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 108–9: "This phrase can refer to the present age (cf. 'before his sight,' KJV, NKJV, TNIV, NIV) or the final judgment (cf. "into his own presence," REB). In light of the frequent uses of the related word 'before' (ἐνώπιον) elsewhere in Paul in the sense of 'in the sight of' or 'in the opinion of' (Rom 3:20; 12:17; 14:22; 1 Cor 1:29; 2 Cor 4:2; 7:12; 8:21; 1 Tim 2:3; 5:4), a future reference is not necessary."

with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

Look, there is a future reality to this. There will come a day when we will literally be in the presence of God the Father and Christ the Son will be our advocate (see **Rom 14:10; 1 Thess 3:13**). But this is an already/not-yet thing! This is already happening. Christ is already our Advocate! We are already reconciled to God. And we are already presented to God in this fashion. **God the Father does not see us and our sin stains and our mess-ups and our taintedness and our sinfulness. He sees us through the prism of Christ.**⁴³

He sees as holy and blemishless and irreproachable, because he sees his Son in our stead. This is what we call substitutionary atonement. This is what we call imputed righteousness. It’s imputed two ways. He took our sin upon the cross, and therefore we take his righteousness before God. **It’s the greatest exchange of goods in the history of the world. It’s the greatest deal known to man. Just put your faith in Christ, and from that point forward you will stand cleansed before God the Father.**

But hold on now. We’re not done. Paul’s not done. You’ve got to deal with verse 23. And this is a warning text. Verse 23 is as sober and as somber as verse 22 is celebrative. This is serious business here.

Finally, fourthly... those reconciled to God the Father through Christ also...

4) Continue steadfast in faith (1:23)⁴⁴

Paul says at the end of **verse 23**.

²³ if indeed⁴⁵ you continue in the faith, stable⁴⁶ and steadfast,⁴⁷ not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all⁴⁸ creation⁴⁹ under heaven,⁵⁰ and of which I, Paul,⁵¹ became a minister.⁵²

43 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 65: “God sees us now as we will be in heaven when we are glorified. He views us clothed with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ.”

44 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 39: “If we have been reconciled, this is our position before God right now, and it will be increasingly true in our life as we grow into his image.”

45 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 109: “In the NT, the phrase ‘if indeed’ appears only in Paul, and it can denote both more probable (2 Cor 5:3; Eph 3:2; 4:21) and less probable (Gal 3:4) conditions. In this case, the focus should not be on the probability of the condition, although elsewhere in this letter one does find Paul affirming the likelihood of this condition being fulfilled (cf. 1:3–6; 2:5). The focus is rather on the conditionality of the statement as it functions as a call for the Colossian believers to be faithful to the gospel they have received (cf. 2:6–7).”

46 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 145: “How may the Colossians continue in their faith? Positively, by being *established and firm*; negatively, by not being *moved from the hope held out in the gospel*. Both positive descriptions have their background in the world of building. The Greek verb behind *established* (*themelioō*) refers to ‘laying the foundation’ of a building (cf. Matt. 7:25), and its form (a perfect tense) highlights the need for believers constantly to live in a state of ‘being securely founded.’”

47 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 110: “This word group together with the reference to ‘steadfast’ has already appeared in Paul’s earlier writings: ‘be steadfast, do not be moved’ (ἔδραῖοι γίνεσθε, ἀμετακίνητοι, 1 Cor 15:58).”

48 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 146–7: “Paul is simply exaggerating to make his point; and there are New Testament parallels for this usage. See, for instance, Acts 2:5, which claims that Jews ‘from every nation under heaven’ were present at Pentecost. To be sure, this exaggeration nevertheless makes an important point: the reconciliation of ‘all things’ accomplished in the cross of Christ (v. 20) has its counterpart in the proclamation of this event in ‘the whole creation.’ Paul wants the Colossians to understand the gospel is the one, universal answer to the quest for spiritual fulfillment.”

49 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 110: “Instead of simply labeling this claim as a ‘hyperbole,’ the eschatological, cosmic, and confessional nature of this note must be understood. As in the preceding hymn where ‘firstborn from the dead’ (v. 18) points to the beginning of the new eschatological era in which one finds the fulfillment of God’s redemptive act, this phrase may focus on the universal impact of the power of the cross that is yet to be fully revealed... In cosmic terms, the universality emphasized here should not simply be understood in geographical/horizontal terms (‘every person everywhere’), but in cosmic/vertical terms (‘every realm of beings’).”

50 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 146: “It is obvious that the gospel in Paul’s day had not been proclaimed to every creature under heaven... What Paul is probably saying, then, is not that the gospel has been proclaimed to every creature but *throughout* the whole creation.”

51 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 147: “It is unusual for Paul to name himself in the course of one of his letters. Perhaps he does so here to distinguish himself from Timothy (1:1).”

If... people!⁵³ If... If ... you continue!⁵⁴

Christianity is not a phase. Christianity is not insurance. **Faith in Christ is not a blip on the map of your life... something you did at some point in your past without any lasting influence on your life.** That's not how it works. That's not how it has ever worked.

Faith in Christ is a lifestyle. It's a calling. It changes everything. **And if faith in Christ hasn't changed you, it hasn't saved you. And you don't outgrow faith in Christ. You don't put it on and put it off when it's inconvenient. It takes over you. It changes everything. And a person who has legitimately put their faith in Christ Jesus continues steadfastly in faith. They don't jettison it when life gets hard and faith in Christ gets uncomfortable.**⁵⁵

We call this "perseverance of the saints," which I prefer over "once saved/always saved."⁵⁶ **People use the term "once saved/always saved" like it's a rabbit's foot or a four-leaved clover. "I prayed a prayer I didn't really mean when I was a kid and now I'm saved and headed for heaven even though I've lived like the devil ever since."** That is not biblical Christianity.⁵⁷

And by the way, I've said this before, but I'll say it again, "Deconstructed Christians" are not Christians. And they never were. Ex-vangelicals are not Christians who lost their salvation. Ex-vangelicals were never Christians. They have just outed themselves as what they always were.

When someone gets sealed by the Holy Spirit, you cannot be unsealed (Eph 1:13–14; 2 Cor 1:21–22). When you get born again, you don't get unborn again. Ex-vangelicals were never Christians. "Deconstructed Christians" were never Christians in the first place. You can't deconstruct something that never existed in the first place.

"How do I make sense of that, Pastor Tony? There are all these people running around saying I used to believe, but now I don't." "There are all these 'Christian' musical artists from my childhood who now say they don't believe. What gives? What do I do with that?"

Here's how I make sense of it? **"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19).**

To use Paul's language here, they didn't "continue in the faith." They shifted from the "hope of the gospel." They proved themselves unbelievers. Paul dealt with people like that. Paul names people like that in the NT—Demas, Alexander, Hymenaeus, and Philetus (see **1 Tim 1:19–20; 2 Tim 2:17–18; 4:10**). There were people who heard Paul preach, received his ministry, and outwardly identified with Christ... they may even have been baptized by Paul... and yet eventually they repudiated the gospel.

Why is Paul telling us this in **Colossians 1:23**? What's the warning about? Why is he telling the Colossians this? **To me, it's kind of like those zombie movies when people wander from the safety of a community and start walking toward the zombies. And usually, the main character of the show is like,**

52 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 105n2: "κ* reads κήρυξ και ἀπόστολος ('herald and apostle') instead of διάκονος ('servant'), presumably since the latter seemed too inadequate to express the status of Paul."

53 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 144: "This warning, along with many similar ones, presents the 'human responsibility' side in the biblical portrayal of final salvation. God does, indeed, by his grace and through his Spirit, work to preserve his people so that they will be vindicated in the judgment; but, at the same time, God's people are responsible to persevere in their faith if they expect to see that vindication."

54 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 143: "Paul at the same time reminds us that this new status is not an end in itself but has a further goal in view: that we who are already 'holy' in status should become 'holy' in reality."

55 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 110: "Such emphasis on the need for persistence in Christian belief and conduct is a regular feature in Paul (e.g., Rom. 8:13, 17; 11:22; 1 Cor. 9:27; 10:11–12; Gal. 5:4) and should not be ignored."

56 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 66: "Perseverance is the hallmark of the true saint."

57 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 66: "One of the most sobering truths in the Bible is that not all who profess to be Christians are in fact saved. Our Lord warned, 'Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:22–23)."

“Don’t go there. Don’t wander off. Don’t get near the zombies.” But inevitably they wander. Or they get curious. And they play with fire. And then, they get turned into a zombie themselves.

Every time I hear about another Christian who deconstructed, I think to myself, “Great, another zombie going off into Zombieland! Have fun!” No gospel. No hope for the future. No Christianity. No church. No Christian brothers in Christ. Off you go into the despair that Jesus came to save us from. Great!

And Paul is saying here, “Real Christians continue. They don’t get seduced by the ridiculous notions of this world. They don’t listen to false teachers who try to infiltrate the church with their heresies. And they don’t listen to the world and the foolishness of this world which Paul calls previously ‘the domain of darkness.’”

I know this probably hits close to home for some of you. Probably every person in this room has a relative or family member or friend who has wandered away from the faith and no longer believes. My encouragement to you today is that it is not irreversible. There is still time for repentance and reconciliation. Don’t give up on them! Keep praying for them!

In fact, Paul calls himself a “minister” in **verse 23**. Everyone see that? That’s the word *διάκονος* (*diakonos*) in Greek.⁵⁸ It’s the same word that Paul uses to describe Epaphras in **verse 7**. **I told you already that we are all deacons of Christ Jesus.** Everyone of us is a *διάκονος*. Even Paul was a *διάκονος*. Even Jesus was called a *διάκονος* (see **Rom 15:8**). He came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (**Matt 20:28**).

But more particularly we are called to be “ministers of reconciliation.” Each one of us is called to be a *διάκονος* of reconciliation. Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:17–18**, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry (*διακονία* [*diakonia*]) of reconciliation.” **God the Son is the agent of reconciliation. And we are the mouthpieces of reconciliation. We are his ambassadors.**⁵⁹ **Those are our marching orders. We have received reconciliation. Now, go out there and be a *διάκονος* of reconciliation.**

I’ll close with this. In the massive biography of George Whitefield, Arnold Dallimore tells the story about a woman who invited another woman to hear the great evangelist preach. But the woman refused. She didn’t like Whitefield or his preaching. And she objected strongly saying, “It is monstrous to be told, that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.”⁶⁰ I’ll just tell you church, that’s the kind of high-minded, foolish thinking that gets people sent to hell for eternity.

Our “breeding,” if I can use that term, is a sinful breeding. We are sinners, this is true. And the ground is level at the foot of the cross, and nobody comes to Christ with anything other than sin and brokenness.

But “in Christ” our identity before God the Father is changed. He doesn’t see us through our sin. He doesn’t judge us according to what we deserve. He sees us through the prism of his dear Son. And in Christ, we are welcomed into his presence for eternity.

⁵⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 112: “Paul and his immediate circle could never forget that he had been given a special and decisive mission as ‘apostle to the nations’ (Rom. 11:13). But here it is not his apostolic status which is emphasized (that was not under threat at Colossae; see n. 2); rather, the privileged but hard service which his calling involved (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5).”

⁵⁹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 67: “God sends His people forth as ambassadors into a fallen, lost world, bearing unbelievably good news. People everywhere are hopelessly lost and doomed, cut off from God by sin. But God has provided the means of reconciliation through the death of His Son. Our mission is to plead with people to receive that reconciliation, before it is too late.”

⁶⁰ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Volume I (Westchester: Crossway Books), 132. Quoted in Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 39.

There's a present reality to that. But this is already/not-yet thing. There is also a future reality to that. Our sins will be removed from us for eternity. The whole of creation will be recreated. And we will bask in the presence of God forever in a sinless, state of perfection with incorruptible bodies.

That's what awaits those who are "in Christ." That's what awaits those who are in him. Are you "in Christ"? Are you reconciled to God the Father through your faith in Christ?