

## **Making Peace, Colossians 1:19-24**

**Good Friday, April 3, 2015**

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### **Introduction**

Paul's theme in our Colossians text today is a before and after picture of the believer in Jesus. Before we received Jesus Christ in our hearts we were alienated from God, enemies against God in our minds and our behaviors. But then Jesus Christ offered himself to us, to be the remedy for our sinful condition and to make us holy, that is, a new kind of person, reconciled and at peace with God. This is what Jesus achieves on the cross, this is the reason Jesus chose to die. Our part of this new Covenant with God, this new peace with God sealed in Christ's blood, is to remain in our newness of life, following in the new pattern planted within us by his Spirit.

**Let us pray:** Lord God, give us all that we need to continue in faith, in holiness and in hope that everything needed for our peace is done for us through your Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

### **1. Mind Games**

In our sinful natures we are alienated from God in our minds. Alongside the Christian gospel there has been a competing view, found in philosophies from all over the world, that because the human mind is capable of reasoning and of ingenuity, it must be capable of finding within itself all the resources it needs for spiritual insight and virtuous living. In western society this kind of philosophy began to find momentum again during the Renaissance era and prevailed in what became the Enlightenment era. By the time of the American Revolution many of these philosophies had evolved into a religious alternative to Christian faith, called Deism. This philosophy held that while the existence of God was self-evident, God was also unknowable,

miracles were a myth, Jesus was only a man. Their rational religion held that God would judge people based on the exercise of virtue or vice according to the comprehension of human reason. Deists had little use for the Bible and its story of the God of Israel, of redemption, of blood and sacrifice. Deists such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine cannot, by any stretch of definition, be called “Christians,” yet they were committed to virtue in public and in private, believing their souls hung in the balance.

The generations that followed carried forward the notion that God cannot be known, and began to suppose that God is so beyond and untouched by the human condition, as to make our concern over “sins” to be merely childish and immature. Now the philosophy that seems to dominate western society today is that, yes, God exists, but God is utterly unconcerned about virtues or vices: what we do in our bodies is up to us; virtue is measured by consent and by the benefit of society; sin itself does not actually exist.

It is the faith of the Christian church that these mind-games are a trap that leads to destruction. Sin is real, but the merely human mind does not want to acknowledge sin, it is blind to the reality of sin, because sin is controlling the natural human mind. It is true that God is unknowable to the natural human mind. That is why God shows himself. That is why God reveals himself. Because we cannot reach him, God comes to us. That is the gospel; God is knowable because God chooses to make himself known. To claim that God is unknowable and sin is human-created myth, to reject God’s own self-revelation in God’s own Word, and the life and death of God’s own Son, is to remain alienated and an enemy to God, and darkened in mind no matter what the world calls “enlightenment.”

## **2. Evil Behavior**

The mind that is alienated to God directs the body to evil behavior. We must not think of

this as evil in the form of a super-villain taking on Captain America and the Incredible Hulk.

Evil is much more subtle: In our alienation from God we convince and justify ourselves that our evil is good.

Before we know it the season of fruit-flies shall be upon us again. Once they arrive from the grocery store they find places in the kitchen where they can multiply themselves. And so I have done research in how to remove the pests. Combining vinegar or red wine with dish soap in a little tray is an effective way of trapping fruit flies, hopefully before they breed. The reason it works is that the trap's color and odor appeals to the nature and instinct of the fruit fly; everything the fruit fly believes about itself is convinced that the dish of wine set out before it is a good thing. But the dish soap within the wine acts as an undertow. When the fruit fly breaks the surface of the wine it gets pulled under and drowns. The fruit fly is not smart enough to resist the trap and it is not strong enough to rescue itself from the trap.

Friends, I believe in the human intellect. I am glad for the progress in medicine and technology. I look forward to the great human adventure of space exploration. But ingenuity does not make us holy; it does not save our souls. Even as we find new ways to improve our lifestyles we also find new ways to destroy life, disturb ecology, and fashion new weapons to use against each other. We must understand that as it concerns our spiritual nature and all the inclinations of the mind, we are as fruit-flies. A person who is much smarter and more crafty and subtle than we are, the Devil, hates us and he has baited all kinds of traps to pull us down and destroy us. But in our natural minds we do not know that these traps are evil, because everything about us, our instincts, our desires, and minds, pulls us toward those traps and thinks of those traps as good things. Money, ambition, sex, gluttony, revenge, laziness – we begin to live for one or more of these things or other things –the list of traps is a long one—and we tell ourselves that

these things are good, as we are pulled into the undertow and they take over our lives and destroy our souls. We need a rescuer from beyond our own selves and instincts toward evil behavior, whose power exceeds our power and also exceeds the power of our enemy. The good news is we have such a rescuer.

### **3. But Now**

“But now,” says Paul, “But now...” Our rescuer is God, our Creator, who knows the remedy for our evil minds and behaviors and offers it to us. This remedy is the blood of Jesus Christ, shed to purify us from our sins. When a car is under warranty the agreement often stipulates that any repairs to be covered have to be done at a dealer’s shop. The theory is that the dealer knows the car the best, what issues tend to arise, and how to fix them. Our world is filled with all kinds of remedies for the problems caused by sins. We have drugs to modify thoughts and impulses, we have counselors, we have police and courts and prisons and armies, and preachers and philosophers of every kind. Who better to trust with our remedy than the one who built us in the first place? Do we really expect to know better than God what is needed for our sins and alienation? Do we really expect to improve on what God has revealed and spoken and preserved in his Word?

The text affirms that it is we as sinners who are alienated. It is we as sinners who need to be reconciled. It is God who takes all the initiative, and that initiative is taken through Jesus Christ. Some theologies have risen up to try to explain what the cross means for us, and have said such things as, Jesus is a peacemaker between God and humankind. This is based on an assumption that God is alienated, that God needs to be reconciled, that God needs a payment for sin in order to be “satisfied;” in other words, that somehow, God’s grace needs to be paid for.

This is twisted around. Sin in us did not create a problem in God, Jesus did not take up

the cross in order to “fix” God. In Jesus God takes up the cross. God is the peacemaker. The cross is the sign of peace. Jesus Christ shared in our death, bearing the curse on himself, in order to break the curse’s power. That he rose again is of course the theme to preach on Easter Sunday. But Paul does not write that we are reconciled by his resurrection. We are reconciled by his death. The blood Jesus shed in his innocence he offers to us, that we may present it to God as our covering and cleansing from sin. This is the peace God offers to us: God shared in our life, and now God invites us to share in His life, freely, to all who desire to be reconciled and near to God. Beneath the cross there is room for you.

This is far removed from any religion or philosophy that says that when we die we will be judged by a Creator who never knew what it was like to be a human being, to be hungry and angry and lonely and tired. Opponents to Christian faith object that it is unfair to visit the judgment for sin on an innocent person, how can God do such a thing to Jesus? This comes up partly in protest of the theology that God in some way had needed to be fixed. But even so, we stand with the evangelical faith that affirms that yes, Jesus’s death is a sacrifice for sin, as our own founding theologians in the Covenant also affirmed. And in that sacrifice Jesus is not fixing God, Jesus is God himself, the Word made flesh in order to experience what we endure in the flesh. I would much rather have the Crucified One be my judge, than have a remote God who knows nothing of being human but at the same time has left virtue all up to me. And I would much rather the Crucified One be the one to instruct us in the things that make for peace, than to put faith in a God who has no concern at all for righteousness.

#### **4. Established and Firm**

Paul goes on to write that we are to continue in our faith, “established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.” It is one thing to be saved from a trap but unless

our very natures are changed, we will return to the traps from which we were rescued. The promise that we have from God in Jesus Christ is that we can become a new kind of person with a new kind of instinct and a new kind of accountability that helps us avoid the traps of sin, no matter how appealing they might be.

We are established and firm in that we no longer need to be guided by our old sinful natures because we have the opportunity to be guided directly by the Holy Spirit. While the world supplies us with its messages, that all of these traps are good things, we can turn away from those temptations and set our minds on the Spirit by opening the scriptures, to read them or hear them prayerfully. The self-revealing Word of God becomes the very words of God as their counsels are whispered to us from the Spirit.

Paul goes on to talk about how this life that is reconciled to God and purified from sin, takes on the nature of suffering, as Jesus suffered, for the sake of the gospel. He says something very interesting in verse 24, something not often heard on a Good Friday: "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the Church." There will not be very many evangelical Atonement theologies that are comfortable with this text. What is Paul saying?

The death of Jesus Christ is all-sufficient, there is no more need for sacrifices for sins. But now Jesus is invisible to us and his death is in the past. For the present, from Paul's time forward, the testimony to Christ is established in the church not only by how we worship and what we proclaim, but also, by the testing and endurance of believers as we die daily, not by falling into the traps of sin but instead by putting our flesh under discipline to avoid those traps. The more we set this witness before the world, the more we will be despised within it, so in addition to wrestling with the sins of our own flesh, we will also be suffering heavier degrees of

persecution. So Paul is not saying anything new or that departs from the faith of the first twelve apostles. Jesus himself said that life with him meant carrying a cross. His first disciples heard that, but when the time came they all ran away. After Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to them, and sent them on their mission, they began to praise God for the opportunity to suffer again – beatings, jailings, even death.

Doctrines of the cross that take people off the hook of responsibility are incomplete and in error. It is truer to the gospel to say, for what will you suffer and die? Will you suffer and die in your sins and be destroyed, or will you suffer and die in Jesus Christ and so enter with him into Paradise? This is our redemption, that the power of God which reconciles us to God is the power of God that keeps us established and firm, now, and forever; this power of God is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.