

Colossians: Alive in Christ | Colossians 1:21-23

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 May 2017

Preacher: Rev. Josh Ruiter

[0 : 00] Good evening to all of you, to the mothers here. Happy Mother's Day. It's great to be with you tonight, and we're happy that you gave some of your cherished holiday to come and worship together with us.

We pray for our children because of your hard labors, so thank you for that. We're still in a series in the book of Colossians, and last week we looked at a question that Dan proposed to us out of chapter 1, verses 15 through 20.

That question was, who is Jesus? And the answer he gave us was, Jesus is God. However, for Paul, the whole Bible, the whole of God's story is a love letter.

That's how Paul sees it, and I think he's right. For example, we can look at John 3, 16, where it says, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. For God so loved the world. His story is a love letter to us, and so for Paul, having asked the question last week of who is Jesus, there has to be a follow-up, right? I don't know if any of you have experienced this in your own life, but if you send off a love letter and you get nothing back, it feels pretty miserable, doesn't it?

[1 : 19] Just kind of sent yourself out there in a thin air and nothing came back. It means nothing. The love letter you sent means nothing without some sort of reciprocation, right? So this week, in chapter 1, verses 21 through 23, Paul shows us the response.

So if last week's question was, who is Christ? And the answer is, he is God. The question this week is, what does it mean to be a Christian? For Paul, this is one of the most important questions we can ask.

Paul is so convicted by this question that he believes the question we looked at last week, the reality of who is Christ, means nothing if we don't also have a personal relationship.

If we haven't asked this question, wrestled with it, dealt with it, and let it impact our lives, this question makes that question matter that much more.

So, who is Jesus Christ? He is God. What does it mean to be a Christian?

[2 : 23] How will we respond to his love letter? If you ask this question to ten different people, you'll probably get ten different responses, right? You ask this question to one person, they might say, well, it means going to church on Easter and Christmas.

You ask this question to another person, they might say, well, I was baptized once. Which we would say, good, once is all you need. But, that doesn't mean that you're a Christian, necessarily.

For many people, it's a Sunday requirement to check a box. You ask somebody else, and they might say, well, you know, it's an option. It's just an alternative option of morals and worldviews set side by side with things like Buddhism and Hinduism and Islam.

It's a choice that you get to make of what your morals will be and what your worldview will look like. For yet others, it's a passed down tradition. Grandma and granddad, they were Christian, so I must be too.

They went to church, so I go to church. Mom and dad went to church, so that's what I'll do. And yet, to some others, it's nothing more than an irrelevant, out-of-touch form of hyper-conservatism, full of hate-mongering and indifference towards anybody who's different than you.

[3 : 38] Or maybe, some of you in this room thought it was this at one point in your life. I know I did. I went off to some high school retreat, one wonderful summer, and that Friday night, I prayed the salvation prayer.

But none of those quite hit the nail on the head, do they? So tonight's question, what does it mean to be a Christian? Have you spent time dwelling on the importance of this question in your life? Have you spent time wrestling with the impact that this should have on us, and can have in us, if we let it just sit and be with us? This morning's text is not a theological deep dive.

It's not an intellectual exposition from Paul for us to get way off into the weeds. It means, no, tonight's text is a pastoral invitation to you. It's a pastoral invitation to you to ask this question of ourselves.

And unlike any other religion or worldview or moral system, the Christian faith is honest. It's honest about who we are and who God is and who we were made to be.

[4 : 48] So to answer the question of what does it mean to be a Christian, we're going to look at what Paul says are the three phases of spiritual life. What you once were, but now you are, and how you must go on.

What you once were, but now you are, and how you must go on. Let's pray for God's help in this. Heavenly Father, God, we come to you tonight. We open up your word, your story, your love letter to us.

As we do that, soften our hearts, God. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the things that you have prepared for us. As we wrestle with these questions and think about what it means to be a Christian, God, I ask that you might make it take effect in our hearts and in our lives, tonight and leaving this place into the week ahead.

In your name we pray. Amen. So the first thing then Paul says is what you once were. Why does he start there?

Because you see, for a Christian there's always a before. For every Christian there's a time before Christ. There's a time before the Holy Spirit transformed you.

[6 : 03] There was a way of living that wasn't so much about God and his will for your life as it was about your own desires, your own ideas, your own fantasies.

This, what you once were, says Paul, is alienated and hostile in mind, causing us to do evil deeds. So let's take just a little bit of time unpacking that statement together. You once were alienated, he says.

Another way of translating this that might be helpful to some of you is estranged or isolated. You once were alienated, estranged or isolated. What does this mean? I think two questions we have to ask about that is, who are we alienated from?

And what does this alienation do to us? Well, one quick response to the question is found in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, chapter 59, verse 2, where it says, Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear you.

So who are we alienated from? God, our creator. And anything that is alienated from its creator loses its true value and purpose and identity.

[7 : 20] Diana, if you'd be willing to put the image up on the screen for us. You see a painting here? It's a rather unassuming piece of artwork.

It's not poorly done. But it also doesn't strike any sort of awe in us. In fact, when I first looked at this, I thought to myself, Yeah, that's a pretty good piece of art.

I could see myself paying \$25 for that at TJ Maxx or Target. It looked really good above my leather chair. That is, it's uninspiring until you find out this is actually a long-lost piece of Picasso.

It's a long-lost piece of Picasso, now valued in hundreds of thousands of dollars. This isn't Target or TJ Maxx. This is Picasso.

Because of who the creator is, because of who the painter is, this otherwise unassuming piece of art becomes highly valued and known by the whole world.

[8 : 24] And just like that, us being estranged from our creator, we lose our purpose. We lose our value. We lose our identity. And so we live in this world mostly unknown, wandering around from A to B and B to C in a constant effort to be known, to be loved.

We are created beings out of touch with our creator, living without a given purpose or identity. So we wander around, like I said, seeking the answer to these two questions.

Who am I? Or am I known? I think two of the great 20th century philosophers say it quite beautifully when John Lennon and Sir Paul McCartney described our alienation in this way.

He's a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody, doesn't have a point of view, knows not where he's going to.

Isn't he a bit like you and me? Nowhere man, please listen. Alienation.

[9 : 44] It's so prevalent in our culture and in our time, isn't it? People are alienated from family, from parents, from children, from spouses, from friends.

But most of all, this reveals this alienation from God that we all have felt at one time or another. And it leads us to taking a quick fix, right? The next thing.

A next relationship. A different job. A new hobby. A new hobby. It's an exhaustive list. But quick fixes only lead to more and more and more pain and restlessness, don't they?

If you've been down that road, you know full well, every quick fix only leads to a little bit more pain and a little bit more restlessness and a little bit deeper search.

We find ourselves living as aimless wanderers. And I think the great church father, the great church father, Augustine, says it really well when he put it this way. You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless.

[10:49] And our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. As alienated creatures, we will forever be restless, forever be wandering, until we find our rest in God.

But Paul doesn't stop there at alienation, does he? He says alienation, its desire to be known by someone, its desire to have purpose and identity, leads to something.

He said it leads to a hostility of mind. Which comes out of this longing that we have. This longing to be loved. And when we can't fill that, it's frustrating, isn't it?

It's incredibly frustrating. Paul says that alienation, that frustration lead to hostility. What ends up happening then is when we're alienated from God and continue to try to get something from creation that creation cannot give us, we begin to grow hostile in mind.

You could take that and put it in the dictionary as the definition of insanity, couldn't you? Doing something over and over again expecting a different result. Trying to get something from creation that creation cannot give us.

[12:02] And we do it again and again and again. And we get hostile. When that happens, simply put, somebody has to be blamed, don't they? Somebody has to be blamed for this hostility, for this alienation, for this frustration, for this cycle that we find ourselves in.

And so we begin to blame. We begin to blame the people closest to us. It's my wife's fault. It's my husband's fault.

It's my boss's fault. He doesn't treat employees well at all. You'd probably put it a little bit differently if you are hostile. It's my kid's fault. They're not living up to the expectations that I have for them.

I didn't set the bar that high. You see how this hostility leads to blaming. Ultimately, though, isn't all of this really just blaming God?

Whether or not you realize it, every time we get to that place, what we're doing is blaming God. God didn't give you the right job. He didn't give you the right boss. He didn't make your wife love you enough or your children smart enough to live up to the expectations that you think you ought to have for them.

[13:11] He didn't perform a miracle so you could afford some \$1,500, or sorry, some half-million-dollar townhouse in the middle of Washington, D.C. that has 1,500 square feet. What a gift that would be, right?

But he doesn't provide it. So you blame him. Do you see where this is going? Our alienation and sin drives us to hostility in mind, leads us to blaming God for the very thing that we did in the first place.

And yet Paul says, I'm sorry, but it doesn't even stop there. You're alienated. You are hostile. And then that drives you to evil deeds.

It's easy to stand and sort of analyze culture and say, look at all of the bad there and all of the bad there. Or look at someone who commits some egregious sin and say, look at all of the evil there.

Paul says, it doesn't start there. It starts with your alienation from your creator that leads to hostility, that leads to evil deeds. What are these evil deeds?

[14:24] It's been a whole sermon or sermon series on expounding on the evil deeds that human nature drives out of us. But we don't have to tonight because if you were to flip a page in your Bible to chapter 3, Paul gives us a list.

In chapter 3 he says, here's the evil deeds. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Let me read that list one more time. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Doesn't that pretty accurately describe our culture? I think so. I think so. And yet in that, our culture invites us into something, don't they?

Culture invites you to create your own identity, to be the real you. Be true to yourself. Do what feels authentic to you in the moment.

[15 : 34] Right? We hear that all over the place. Advertising and marketing makes billions on our desire to be authentic to where we are right now, to be the real us.

But that's the problem, isn't it? If you're alienated from your creator and estranged from his truth and are not the real you, how can we possibly do what culture invites us to?

We can't. Culture can't deliver on its own invitation and promise to us. Culture can't. But the good news is the gospel can.

Jesus Christ can. Why? Because Jesus Christ was the most real man. Constantly true to himself. He suffered alienation, estrangement, isolation from God. He undeservingly died for us and was raised to life so that we might be reconciled.

[16 : 40] So that this alienation, this long lostness that we have might no longer be the case. The Bible puts it this way. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus did it all. And he was raised from death so that what you once were, who you once were, no longer describes who you now are. So Paul starts with saying, you once were alienated and hostile.

But then, I'm going to take the words out of the NIV translation because I think it's powerful here.

You once were alienated and hostile, but now, but now, you are reconciled.

Do you have a but now in your story? Think about your life. Do you have a but now in your story?

You once were alienated or estranged, but now, friends, you are known by God.

What no job or salary or spouse or relationship or child or parents or hobby could ever give you and never will be able to give you, you have been given in Christ at the cross.

[18 : 05] The chasm that once distanced us from God, that unbridgeable gap has been bridged by the cross. Isolation, alienation from God is over.

It's no longer the reality of our world. Throughout the Bible, we'll see this reconciliation language come again and again and again.

Just a couple examples of this. You once were but now are language. You once were blind but now you see. You once were far off but now are near.

You once were lost but now are found. You once were slaves but now you're free.

You see that reconciliation language throughout the Bible? The but now moment of our existence?

This is a powerful statement. This is a powerful statement because by nature a slave cannot free themselves.

[19 : 19] Slaves can't get up one morning and go to the master and say, alright, today's the day. we're free. It doesn't work that way. A slave cannot by nature get themselves out of their own situation.

Someone outside of slavery has to break in and free the slaves. And it's only Jesus, the God man, the one who is outside of our human condition that could break in and free us.

He's the only one who can give us a but now. Do you see how last week's question has to impact the rest of our lives? Who is Jesus?

He is God. What does it mean to be a Christian? You were once alienated, but now. But now.

And it's not our own efforts. It's not our own efforts to achieve this. It isn't living well enough. It isn't serving often enough, even though we love you to serve here.

[20 : 26] Because we were enslaved and alienated. It can't be our efforts, right? That's the good news. That's the good news of grace. The good news of grace of the Christian faith.

That though we could not get out of our own situation, Jesus, who is God, broke in. Remember what we read in Isaiah 52, a little while ago?

Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he does not hear you, what you once were.

Isaiah 53, just one chapter later, gives us the correction. Isaiah 53, 6 says this, all we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him, Jesus, the iniquity of us all.

Let this hit you afresh this evening. Jesus, God, entered in to rescue you, to reconcile you, to offer you the but now that you've been searching for, to give you the purpose, the identity, the knownness that you have always longed for.

[21 : 53] And having received this, it's the only way that we friends can go into a hopeless world as hopeful people. It's the only way that we can bring joy into the world because we are known by our

creator.

We have a purpose now. Just like the painting being known as a Picasso now has value, so you being known by God have immense, undeniable, unchangeable value in the but now life. Because there's a way out. There's an old wonderful hymn that I think says this better than I could. It says this, there's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin.

There's a door that is open and you may go in. At Calvary's cross is where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus. You once were alienated, but now, but now you are reconciled. And then Paul continues on and he says, and reconciliation doesn't stop there, it comes with a purpose, right? He says, it's for something. That for something that Paul tells us is this, to present you holy and blameless for the glory of God.

[23 : 13] And so the whole world can know. You see, you are the proof to the world of who Christ is. And you are a presentation to God of Christ's work here on earth.

Both ways. both ways. But reconciliation isn't just a moment either. It's not just a moment somewhere back in time.

Because we arrive at verse 23, and it says this, if you continue on in your faith, Paul adds a last layer here that's not the easiest one to unpack together.

What is he saying here? What is he saying? Is he saying that we could lose our salvation? No, that's not Paul's point right here.

The point is that the confidence of the but now, of your reconciliation secured in Christ, cannot and must not lull you to laziness.

[24 : 20] There is no having arrived in the Christian faith. Christianity isn't a retirement lifestyle. exile. There's no end to the work here.

It's ongoing. It's continuing on. And this continuing on is the proof that you have really understood and been reconciled to Jesus Christ.

It's the proof that your life has been changed. Because you see, the statement tells us this very plainly. you once were alienated, but now are reconciled.

Right? There's a shift there that disallows you from returning back to the once were. It's in the past. It's behind you. Something else is before you. There's a different way forward.

The but now of reconciliation means for each one of us that there's a real and noticeably different aspect to our lives when we're reconciled by Jesus.

[25 : 23] So how you must go on here, the if you continue on that Paul gives us is nothing more and nothing less than living the reconciled life. It's an encouragement and a challenge for us.

The reconciled life I think is two primary things. It's being a herald and it's being a harbinger. Let me explain in case you have negative connotations about either of those.

Being a herald, you're called to announce the but now of Christ. The message of the opportunity to be known, to have purpose, to have an identity, the freedom to no longer have to fight tooth and nail and claw your way through life seeking to be valued by somebody or someone out there.

you're called to announce this. And you see here at Advent, if you're a member, you know this and if you're not, hopefully one day soon you'll learn this.

When you become a member, you receive a bell, right? We ring them loud and proud all Easter, that's the second half of Easter vigil I should say, and then all throughout the Easter season.

[26 : 38] But why the bell? Why the bell? Well, because the bell was the tool of an ancient herald who would walk into a community, he would stand in the city square and he would ring the bell as loud as he could until people came from the hedges and the edges of the city, from every building and every direction to gather to listen to the good news that he had to bring.

That is what Paul calls us to be. It's heralds. Wherever you go, you can bring your bell if you want to literally, but more importantly, walk in because you're the one whose job it is to share the good news wherever you're at, wherever you work, wherever you live, wherever you play, wherever your kids are in school, wherever life takes you, you're a herald.

And secondly, you're a harbinger. What do I mean when I say harbinger? Harbinger is primarily the one who shows the first fruits of something to come, the first fruits of something soon on the horizon.

You might consider the cherry blossoms down around the tidal basin to be some sort of harbinger of spring in Washington, D.C. That's your job.

Be a living example. Bodily proof. Of the new life that's coming and has come in Christ through his death and resurrection. And as you live the reconciled life, you also find those people that you used to blame, the hostility you had, the evil deeds that came out of that.

[28 : 21] Little by little, they'll start to be washed away. Because something else is swept up inside of you in this but now life in Christ. Jesus says in the gospel of John, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

So what does it mean to be a Christian? It's none of those one line answers that we listed off the beginning. It's this. It's the recognition that you have a transformation story in Jesus Christ.

You once were alienated but now you are reconciled that you might go on being a herald and a harbinger so that a hopeless world can find hope.

So that a world without purpose can find purpose. So that a world without value can find value in their creator. Like you have. If you're here this evening and you don't yet know Jesus, if you hear this and you're like, I really feel like I'm still in the once were.

I feel like I'm spinning my wheels. Trying to fit in. Trying to be valued. Trying to create an identity. And I want you to hear this.

[29 : 44] This offer. Of your but now moment. Is here tonight. It's always available to you. In the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And if you're willing to, I would invite you to pray tonight if this is you. Pray tonight that Christ would break into your life and your heart. And start to let you know that you are known.

That you are loved. That you have value in him that the world can't dream of giving. And that you have purpose that's unmatched by anything this place has to offer.

This is the good news, friends. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. You who once were alienated from God are now reconciled to him through Christ.

Amen. Amen. Let's pray.