

## Once alienated - Now reconciled\*

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma.

\*Colossians 1:21-23

How real is the gospel to you? When you hear a preacher talk about a person repenting of all their wrong and feeling the joy of forgiveness, do you say: "I can relate to that. That was me"? When you hear about God creating a new heaven and earth where everything will be perfect, do you think: "Yes, that includes me. I'll be there"? When you are reminded of Jesus being Lord of life, do you respond with "Yes, He is my Lord too. I am giving it a real shot to be like Christ at work"? How real is the gospel to you? Can you say that having faith in Jesus Christ has brought about a real change in your life? You see, faith is not just about knowing some theological stuff from catechism. It's about a major life change that brings you into a relationship with God. That is very clear here in our text.

**"Once you were"**. Paul starts off in verse 21 *"Once you were..."* In the Greek there is a strong emphasis here on the *"you"*. That's deliberate. Paul is getting the attention of the first readers of the letter, the Christians at Colosse. In :15-20 Paul has used a magnificent hymn to point out the supremacy of Christ. The Colossians, remember were guilty of syncretism, combining their faith in Jesus with angel worship, magical rites and mysticism. So with this beautiful confession he is saying, in effect, "You don't need angels and magic to protect you. You have Jesus and He is far above everything." Paul points out that Jesus is responsible for the original creation. He is also the beginning of a whole new humanity, the church. And He is responsible for a whole new creation that is coming (:19&20). Everything is being reconciled through Jesus. So Paul has been pointing out this magnificent stuff about what God has done through Jesus. And then he turns from this inspiring teaching and says *"And you once were..."* Now he puts all the focus on the Colossians. His point is to say this: "All this stuff about what God has done in Jesus. It all has to do with you. You are the goal of all this. Everything is being recreated for you as you are reconciled to God. How do I know it applies to you? It can be seen in the major change in your life." Notice the strong contrast between verses 21&22 *"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds ... But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body..."*

**"alienated from God"**. Paul starts off by reminding them of their condition before they become Christian. The *"were alienated from God."* They may have lived in God's world, but they did so as strangers to God. Why the alienation? Well not because they were innocent heathens, poor victims to the condition of sin, ignorant to the reality of God. Paul is very clear and strong. Their alienation involved their thinking and doing. Note verse 21: They *"...were enemies in [their] minds because (Gk- and were engaged in) of their evil behaviour."* Sin so distorts the thinking of unbelievers that when they are confronted with God they convince themselves they did not know about God. But when you read Romans 1 Paul makes it very clear no one has an excuse. He says (Romans 1:18-20) *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."* So, you see, everyone can know about God. Creation sings it out loudly. But says Paul as sinners we *"suppress the truth"*. In Colossians he puts it that they were *"enemies (hostile) in your minds."*

The reality is that before conversion they didn't want to know God. They were "*alienated from God*".

**Expression of alienation.** How might that attitude express itself if we are alienated from God today? Well, it means we have no use for Him. We don't take him into our reckoning. We start and end each day without a thought for him. We go about our own plans, live for ourselves and do what we feel like doing, never giving a thought to God. Or if we do somehow think about him we regard him as some remote being. But we never expect anything from him. Underlying this is the fact that we are really hostile to God, enemies in our minds. Why? Well because he gets in the way. We see him, if we had any conscious regard for him at all, as a "killjoy". So many of the things we like to do and be involved in he calls sin and evil. But we enjoy our lust for power, sex and money. We want to succeed over others, even if we have to walk over them. We don't mind lying and cheating to get our way. All's fair in love and war. Says Paul of the Colossians "That's the sort of people you used to be: "*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds, engaged in evil behaviour*".

**"now reconciled".** "*But now*" says Paul in :22 "*But now he has reconciled you...*". There's the proof that God has worked in the lives of the Colossians, and it's the proof in our lives too. There is an answer. God can be known and loved. Our hostile thinking can be sorted out and our behaviour transformed. It's a wonderful act of God. Notice the language in :22 "*...now he has reconciled you...*" Paul makes it clear that by ourselves we are unable to get out of the grip of sin. The initiative lies with God. God is the offended party who in grace stoops to our level to remove what offends him. He removes the effect of sin that we used to block him out of our lives. Paul's language here is very emphatic. Something has definitely changed. "*Once you were... but now... he has reconciled you...*"

**"by Christ's physical body".** How has God done it? It's the gospel we know so well, but ponder it again. "*...by Christ's physical body through death...*" It is interesting how Paul stresses "*physical body*", literally "body of flesh." Why does he do that? Well, many in Paul's time thought the body was unclean, that all material stuff was bad and you wanted to get away from it. Only your soul was good. So it was doubted that a holy God would 'get physical'. Perhaps the Colossian's syncretism got them tied up in this too. A philosophy of the time 'spiritualized' everything and suggested that Jesus was only spirit and did not literally die. The idea of the spirit being more important than the body still bugs the church. You see it when people think it's more important to have mystical experiences in the spirit than live ordinary daily life for God. But the fact that the Son of God took on human nature, with all its frailties shows how important ordinary physical life is to God. He loves us as He made us, flesh and blood beings. Besides, Jesus needed to take on our nature because it's us, in our all our flesh and bloodedness, that have sinned against God. The fact that Jesus had to die shows how serious sin is. We will always down play it. That's the effect of our hostile minds. It seems to many people ludicrous for God to use the Old Testament analogy of an unblemished slaughtered lamb as the basis to describe Jesus' death on the cross. It is regarded as too gruesome and horrible. But sin is so offensive to God that His just penalty for it is death, eternal death. That God initiated reconciliation through Christ's death speaks volumes of the horror of our sin, but also the wonder of God's grace.

**"to present you holy."** Why has God reconciled the Colossians? Why has he reconciled the Christian Reformed Church of Sydney: "...to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." Now the way Paul phrases that it has the double implication of justification and sanctification. I mean this. Because of Jesus' death God forgives us and sees us as perfect. Jesus paid the penalty and we are set free. So the Spirit has come into our lives and a new life has begun in us. Because of Jesus there has been a major change. "Once we were... but now." Instead of being hostile we now desire to know God and love him and follow him in our living. But there is also the aim that we will actually become "holy and without blemish." One day we will finally be "presented" before God perfect, ready to live on the new earth.

**"if you continue in the faith".** Now it's painfully obvious to all of us that we are still a long way off the goal. But how do we get there? Well, look back at our text and notice how Paul continues the sentence in verse 22& 23 "...he has reconciled you ...to present you holy in his sight...- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." So you get there by staying in the faith. Paul's emphasis here is not a conditional one: if you stay a believer you are saved, if not you will lose your salvation. The point is that the Colossians were to remain content with the gospel message that first saved them from alienation. Remember their problem was one of syncretism. They were taking on board all sorts of ideas and experiences. Paul is saying if you want to reach the goal, stick with what I taught you about Jesus. Stick with the "gospel that you have heard and has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven..." It is not as if you are missing out, if you stay with the gospel and simply trust in Jesus. This is true for all the world. The gospel is all you need. So stick with it. If you do, you will arrive. If you don't, then it begs some questions about what you believed in the first place, because, you see if you really are a child of God you can never fall from His grace. And your being in His grace is demonstrated by your continuing in the faith. As one commentator put it "If it is true that the saints will persevere to the end, then it's equally true that the saints must persevere to the end." Continuance is the test of reality. That's why it's so disturbing to think of those who have grown up in the church, seemed to have the lifestyle of a Christian, and then drifted away, leaving God behind, never really knowing Him. It is heart-wrenching stuff to see. "Continue in the faith..." is Paul's one very clear instruction so far in this chapter. Everything he has written so far, his thanksgiving and prayer for them, the awesome hymn about Jesus, it all leads to this. Colossians "continue in the faith..."

**"established and firm".** Paul is using architectural imagery here when he goes on "continue in the faith...established and firm, not moved." He is talking of a house firmly set on its foundation. It will interest you to know that Colosse was located in an area known for earthquakes. In fact a big one hit the area around AD 60, not long before Paul wrote. The phrase "not moved" can refer to "not earthquake damaged". So Paul is saying if you are truly saved and built on the solid foundation, which is Jesus, then you will continue in the faith. Nothing will move you. As Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote in his hymn:

*"My hope is built on nothing less  
than Jesus blood and righteousness;  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame*

*but wholly trust in Jesus' name.*

*On Christ the solid rock I stand*

*all other ground is sinking sand."*

**The key.** So the key to reaching the goal is to stick with the gospel. Absolutely nothing else is needed, except the bible and our deep trust in Jesus. That needs to be re-emphasized in our day, because our culture is hungry for hype and experiences. Everyone has his or her own ideas and stories to tell, which are all equally valued, because, it is said, all religions are valid. Added to that, is the constant drive to find something new and exciting. The old ways of the church don't seem to cut it anymore, so folk are looking at all sorts of eastern religions, new age stuff, and all sorts of religious ideas. Australians are trying all sorts of things because they are very spiritually dry. Now it's true that churches must do a much better job in getting the message of the gospel out in a clear way, us included. But it is still only the gospel that saves. It is through Jesus alone that we who were "*once alienated from God...can be reconciled to Him.*" And it's through Jesus alone, as we continue in faith with Him that we reach the goal of perfection, the glorious new heavens and new earth "*the hope held out in the gospel.*"

**Hear His word today.** If you have experienced the change in your life, then you know that all the promises in the bible apply to you. Jesus did all this also for you. This is not just a nice set of ideas. It's reality, and it's fact in your life is seen by the change in you- your experience of grace and forgiveness, your desire to know God and live for Jesus. If this is not your experience, if you realize that in reality you so often think and act as if there is no God, that you are alienated from God, then hear his word today and believe. Be changed. Through Jesus you are reconciled to God and discover the joy and the meaning to life.

## **DISCUSSION.**

**Preparation.** Read the sermon notes.

**Readings.** Romans 1:16-25, Colossians 1:15-23. Text :21-23.

### **Questions.**

1. Can you say that believing in Jesus has brought about a major change in your life? Have you had a strong sense of repentance followed by a deep joy in knowing you belong to God, that all His promises are yours?
2. What does it mean to be alienated from God? What is its cause? How does it express itself in everyday life? Do you find any of these expressions in your own life? Are there things you need to repent of?

3. What are the experiences and proofs in your life that God has reconciled you to Himself? What is the part God does in reconciliation and what do we need to do?
  
4. Why is it important to stress that Jesus, as the Son of God, really took on our human nature? Why must we accept that Jesus literally died for our sin, and rose again? What are the implications if these things are denied?
  
5. Why did Jesus die for us who believe? What are the goals? Explain it in terms of our justification and sanctification.
  
6. Paul's instruction "continue in the faith" is his first clear command. Everything so far, his thanksgiving and prayer, his magnificent hymn, all lead to this point. Why is it so important? Why does Paul stress the gospel is all you need? What does it mean 'continuance is the test of faith'? How does it effect you when you see folk drift away from the faith?
  
7. Robert Murray Mcheyne's hymn says clearly :  
*On Christ the solid rock I stand*  
  
*All other ground is sinking sand.*

Why then are so many Australians looking for all sorts of eastern religions and new age stuff? Why are Christians looking for extra mystical experiences?

8. What can we as individuals, and together as a church, do better to get the message of Jesus out to our communities?