

*Colossians 1:21-23. After a warm introduction, Paul draws his readers' attention to a few core doctrines. Colossae was a city in Asia Minor that received quite an influx of religious ideas. Would this new church survive? It was doing well when Paul wrote, but he saw clouds on the horizon. These verses get to the core of the gospel: Sinners reconciled to holy God through faith in Jesus Christ.*

Two men went to pray; O! rather say,  
One went to brag; th'other to pray  
One stands up close, and treads on high  
Where th'other dares not send his eye.  
One nearer to God's altar trod,  
The other to the altar's God.<sup>1</sup>

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, found in Luke 18:9-14, answers an important question: "Who can be right with God?" A crowd formed around Jesus on the outskirts of Jericho to hear Him teach. They didn't come to learn, however, but to critique. Many thought they were already alright with God. They're good people who keep the Law. What could be wrong?

Jesus' parable is about two men. One was a well-respected Pharisee, the other a deplorable tax collector. Both went to the temple and both prayed, but only one walked away right with God. Everyone assumed it would be the Pharisee. These men worked hard to keep the Law. They were dignified. They were well-spoken. They were highly educated and looked holy. As for the tax collector? He was a sellout to the Romans, a man who cheated and associated with the lowlifes of society.

What happened? The Pharisee stood on the temple mount and raised his voice that all could hear his pompous prayer. The tax collector, however, stood ashamed and wouldn't even look up. He knew he wasn't welcome, and he had nothing to offer. What sacrifice could this man possibly bring that would please God? As his tears streamed down he cried over and over, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." More literally, "Make atonement for me... make atonement for me." And that's what God was about to do.

Who can be right with God? Only those who come to Him like the tax collector. *A sinful tax collector reconciled to God? A Pharisee condemned?* Jesus offended everyone that day. They had thought God is good with good people, and they were confident of their own goodness. The problem is that we're all "tax collectors" who need God to do what we can't: make atonement, provide a sacrifice for all our sin.

Paul is about to explain to the Colossians what it means to be right with God. Why do people need to be reconciled to God? How does it happen? What's the point of it? Concerned that this young flock in Colossae might be swayed, Paul wrote about each of these questions and made it personal.

## NOT-SO-GOOD PEOPLE

*Colossians 1:21—"And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds..."*

"Alienated and hostile... doing evil" against God. We would like to believe we're good people with a few faults, and yet here's Scripture saying something quite different. It says we're not good at all, not lovers of God but hostile, not close to Him but alienated. Jesus said the same (Lk 18:19; Jn 8:44), so did the psalmist (Psa 51:1-5), and even the prophets (Isa 64:6; Jer 17:9).

Hard truths are like bitter medicine. "We swallow greedily any lie that flatters us, but we sip only little by little at a truth we find bitter." So said the philosopher, Denis Diderot, and he was right. We don't like to hear we've got a problem, especially one of epic proportion like we find here. Regardless, after starting on a positive note, Colossians addresses this epic problem—*you're a sinner.*

To be a "sinner" is to be born into this world. We aren't sinners as a result of a little white lie here or there, fudging on our taxes one year, or even for doing worse. We aren't sinners because we sin; we sin because we're sinners. Sin is a product of our nature. Sin is what we do from birth. Scripture says that "sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn 3:4), the breaking of God's Law or any offense against His holy character. It doesn't mean we never do good, but that all our good is stained with bad in the sight of God. No one but Christ has ever loved God with ever fiber his being or loved his neighbor as himself (Matt 22:37-39).

Our nature is sinner; God's nature is holy. Thus, we're "alienated" from God, cut off or estranged from Him (Eph 4:17-18). Scripture says we're "hostile" and "doing evil" against the Lord. When we compare ourselves to others, we can't possibly believe any of this. Hostile? *I'm not hostile to God.* Maybe not outwardly, but God views any rejection of Him and His Word as a hostile act.

In the end, if you don't think you're a sinner, you won't believe you need a Savior. And if you don't believe you need one, you'll stand before God without one.

# Reconciled to God

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## A PHYSICAL SACRIFICE FOR SIN

*Colossians 1:22—“He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.”*

As opposed to the pious Pharisee, the tax collector in Jesus’ parable understood his sin—he’s alienated from God, and has lived his life in hostility against God, doing evil. What hope did he have of making things right with God? What sacrifice could he possibly bring to appease the Lord? Nothing.

Left to ourselves, we can’t make things right with God. Our only hope is if God reaches down to restore the relationship for us. Paul explains that reconciliation comes through the death of Christ. It’s atonement language, making a sacrifice to atone sin, a scarlet thread that runs throughout the Old Testament. Yet, there’s one significant difference: Christ was no animal. Being fully God and fully man, He offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sinners.

The Colossian church still believed that Jesus Christ died a physical death. After all, Paul commended these believers for their true faith, their hope in Heaven, and their love for one another (Col 1:2-12). Yet, he knew the church was being challenged. Did Jesus really die? Wasn’t Christ a spirit being? Perhaps He’s a lesser god?

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**“TRUTH, LIKE GOLD, IS TO BE OBTAINED NOT BY ITS GROWTH, BUT BY WASHING AWAY FROM IT ALL THAT IS NOT GOLD”**

**-- LEO TOLSTOY.**

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Paul made certain the Colossians understood the importance of the physical death of Christ. Believers are reconciled to God in Jesus’ “body of flesh by his death” (v. 22). Like the sacrifices of long ago, so was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—physical. Unlike them, He didn’t stay dead but was raised to life.

All of us will be held accountable for our sins, and we only have two options: Receive the punishment ourselves or let another receive it on our behalf. Through faith, Christ’s sacrifice becomes ours that we would be reconciled to God and stand before Him faultless—“holy and blameless and above reproach” (v. 22).

Christianity is a message that rests upon an historical event, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Modify or reimagine what happened,

and you don’t end up with purer gold. Paul sought to wash away any impurities that might have influenced the Colossian church. As he told the church in Corinth, if Christ didn’t physically die and rise again, “we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:17).

## PERSEVERING IN THE FAITH

*Colossians 1:23—“if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.”*

*Reconciled... if I continue in the faith?* It sounds like Paul’s saying there’s a contingency, that a believer might not continue in the faith. Is it possible to be saved and then lose it? That’s not very reassuring, but that’s not what we have here. As you read Colossians, Paul says God is the One who reconciles sinners to Himself (v. 22). He provided the sacrifice of His Son, a sacrifice that atones the sins of a believer’s past, present, and future at the moment of salvation. That’s what it means to be justified (Rom 3:23-24). It’s a verdict, a legal declaration of righteousness from God to man.

New facts may come to light in a court case, perhaps enough to reverse a former verdict. Though that happens in U.S. courts, what new facts will God learn? What will He find that He didn’t already know when He justified someone? God provided the sacrifice to reconcile sinners to Himself, declares them righteous in Christ, and holds onto them to the end (Jude 1:24). Salvation isn’t something given and then ungiven, valid and then invalid (Rom 8:35-39).

However, there’s a warning. Those who are truly saved will continue in the faith. They won’t succumb to new ideas about Jesus and the gospel, for instance. They’ll hold fast. What about those who go astray? It’s as Jesus said that many will stand before Him listing their credentials, offering reasons they should be in Heaven. And what will He say? “I never knew you” (Matt 7:22-23). It isn’t possible for a believer to lose his salvation, but it is possible look ‘Christian’ while not actually being one. That was Paul’s concern with the Colossians.

The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable was a man who thought he belonged in God’s kingdom. The tax collector understood otherwise. Which man pleased God? The one who brought nothing but a prayer. Asking God to save Him, God did.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Crashaw, *Divine Epigrams*.