

(4) Colossians 1:21-23 God - dying to love, forgive and befriend us

SERMON INTRO: Today we continue our Colossians Sermon series. Here's a wee recap and some pictures to help. [Show pic](#)

Apostle Paul is credited with writing Colossians. (The middle picture is one of the earliest depictions of Paul we have.)

Paul wrote this letter whilst in prison, most likely in Rome but possibly from Ephesus. (The picture on the right is one artist's impression of that). Paul was being held by Roman authorities, and he was awaiting an audience with Emperor Nero whom he had appealed to as a Roman citizen. (That's the infamous Nero on the coin on the screen.) At this point the Roman Empire stretched from Spain in the west to Syria in the east and ruled with an iron fist. The Empire, like many empires, brought 'peace' and 'salvation' through conquest and at the point of the sword.

Paul was writing to Jesus followers in Colossae. Colossae was a town neighbouring the more impressive towns of Hierapolis and Laodicea. Colossae is 100 miles east of Izmir in modern day Turkey. If you were to visit Colossae today it would look like this. [Show pic](#) It was destroyed in an earthquake around 60AD and wasn't rebuild unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis. Although the Colossae Paul is writing to is 2000 years ago and 2500 miles away from us in Edinburgh, the letter continues to be incredibly relevant with timeless and timely truths.

[Show pic](#) The Jesus followers who made up the Colossae church were a mix of locals who used to worship the Roman gods and some Jewish worshippers of Jesus. This was a remarkable witness to Jesus! Who else could bring people and families together in this way! This church community came with blessings and challenges because it was made up of...incredible and imperfect people! If (as someone helpfully pointed out to me) you've not noticed that you are a complex and at times contradictory individual - don't worry, the rest of us have! Apostle Paul was all for being honest about this.

This Jesus community with all its dynamics sat within the wider local community with all its tensions, dynamics and pressures which sat within the Greco-Roman world with all its tensions and pressures and dynamics.

Apostle Paul helped plant and grow many churches but the church in Colossae wasn't one of them. His friend Epaphras who is carrying this letter from Paul in prison to Colossae is the one who has shared the good news of Jesus and who is gathering more and more Jesus followers together.

Being a Jesus follower in the Roman Empire was fraught with risk. Paul declaring Jesus as Lord and Saviour and God got him in so much trouble with the Roman and religious establishments including some of the Jewish religious establishment which Paul was part of. Paul and Christianity were making absolute truth claims about Jesus which were rattling cages and turning the world order on its head.

As Cat shared last week – Paul laid out some of these absolute truth claims about Jesus in the remarkable poem/hymn found in verses 15-21 of chapter 1.

Claims like...

...Jesus is actually God in person – fully God and fully human.

...Jesus made and holds all things together

...Jesus is the one true God and is supreme over all things and the only one worthy of our worship. So...

...not king of the gods Jupiter a.k.a. Zeus

...not queen of the gods Juno a.k.a. Hera,

...not god of war Mars a.k.a. Ares

...not goddess of love Venus a.k.a. Aphrodite

...not any Emperor who was claiming to be or acting as if they were god.

Other claims made in the poem are that Jesus had risen from the dead and all who follow Him, would follow Him through death into life. And that God in Christ came and comes to reconcile humans to himself and this is done through him dying on the cross.

These are monumental claims being made at the cosmic and eternal level. Paul then says that these universal truths, this good news about Jesus is rooted in and needs to be rooted in the personal.

Here's what Paul says next. Emma is going to read our passage for today. We're reading from the Message translation. This is the word of God. Colossians 1:21-23
²¹⁻²³ You yourselves are a case study of what he does. At one time you all had your backs turned to God, thinking rebellious thoughts of him, giving him trouble every chance you got. But now, by giving himself completely at the Cross,

actually *dying* for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence.

You don't walk away from a gift like that! You stay grounded and steady in that bond of trust, constantly tuned in to the Message, careful not to be distracted or diverted. There is no other Message—just this one. Every creature under heaven gets this same Message. I, Paul, am a messenger of this Message.

What's really interesting in this passage is that Paul is saying *you the followers of Jesus in Colossae (the church) are a living personal example – a case study of what Jesus has done and is doing*. And when he says **I, Paul, am a messenger of this Message** he is saying, *"me too! I'm also a case study of what Jesus has done and is doing in my life."*

What's also really interesting is that the kind of rebellion against God, the turning our backs, the 'sin' that Paul is talking about involves a radical re-framing of what sin is. With this radical clarification of sin also comes a radical clarification of salvation – what it is, who needs it and how it happens. This clarification and revelation comes not from Paul but from Jesus.

So often 'sin' or turning our backs on God is thought of and spoken about as reckless, wild, hedonistic, individualism that casts off restraints and sticks two fingers up to ethical or moral standards and social norms. A kind of *it's my life, it's my body, I can do whatever I like when I like, you're not the boss of me, no one is the boss of me!*

This kind of life is often marked by: excess, irresponsibility, a go hard or go home mentality, the instant gratification of desires, low self-control, high risk, immoral behaviour, never mind the consequences or tomorrow choices and living dangerously. This kind of life and living is often marked with feelings of shame and worthlessness and leaves the person worse off, hurts people round about them, and contributes to making the world a worse place not a better place.

In Jesus' most famous parable which we (not him) have called 'the parable of the prodigal son', we see this kind of classic sinner type personified in the younger son or younger brother. The younger son tells his father to drop dead because he doesn't want to wait for his inheritance, he wants it now! In the parable this younger son's philosophy of looking good and feeling good is pursued zealously and to its logical conclusion. Which leaves the younger son in the gutter in a terrible state having lost everything. On hearing this then and now, it's easy to think...*Well yes, It's obvious that he's a big sinner because that's what big sinners*

are like and that's what they do. Yes, those are the kinds of people who need saving!

But what we find in that parable and with Paul's life as a case study, is that turning our backs on God or rebelling against God is not just a feature of those who are 'very bad' but it's a feature of those who are 'very good'. And that the 'very good' need God's grace and mercy and to be 'saved' just as much as the very bad.

Paul who was known as Saul before he met with Jesus was 'very good' but he was not very nice. He was just as alienated from God as the younger son. He was just as much sticking his fingers up at God saying I don't want or need you. Because what he was about was religious self-righteousness.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul reflects very honestly about this. This is from chapter 3 verse 4. **If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh [in themselves], I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**

Paul was saying *I couldn't have come from better stock, I couldn't have been more qualified, I was as zealous about keeping our doctrine, practices and standards as anyone.* Paul compared well to everyone, and he knew it! The trouble was he also looked down on everyone because the kind of righteousness he was going for wasn't God's, it was his. Religious Paul was placing his hope and value and worth and standing in his self-righteousness. *Look how good I am. Look how moral I am. Look how ethical I am. Look how dutiful I am! Look how doctrinally sound I am! Look how superior I am to them and them and them.* It became about looking good and feeling good (not through drink and drugs and excess) but through duty and denying himself. Paul's way of living was actually all about...Paul not God! Paul recognises this terrible way of thinking, living and being and his need for a different and better source of righteousness. This is him continuing in Philippians chapter 3...

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and

participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

This self-righteousness doesn't just manifest in one world view, it manifests in all kinds of world views with all kinds of virtue signalling because this is part of the human condition.

This kind of life leads to and is marked by resentment, judgmentalism, ingratitude, the wrong kind of pride, a sense of entitlement as well as superiority and a sense that *I am owed by God/the universe/people because I've worked so hard, sacrificed so much for the cause* (whatever the cause may be) *and I've not done that, that or that like them!*

This kind of living is also marked by secret sin and sense of failure or despair when standards have not been met and when *I have done this or keep doing this 'awful thing' just like those kinds of people!* This kind of life is marked by insecurity because you're never sure you have made the grade, it's marked by constant one up man-ship and performance and putting on a front. This way of living leaves the person worse off, hurts people round about them, and contributes to making the world a worse not a better place.

In Jesus' Parable (found in Luke's gospel chapter 15) this kind of living is personified by the older son who is just as lost and alienated from the father as the younger son. This older son is livid when his wee brother comes home. He's embarrassed that his dad makes a fool of himself running to the younger son. He's outraged that his dad loves and forgives his wayward boy and welcomes him home and back into the family. He's beside himself that a party is thrown for his wee brother and his dad is overflowing with joy because *this son of mine who was lost is found, who was dead is alive.*

In the parable the older brother's heart and deadly self-righteousness is being revealed and challenged just as much as the destructive waywardness of the younger brother. In the parable God's heart, loving kindness and desire for relationship are revealed.

In today's passage Paul is saying *that is our story! we are case studies of what God/Jesus has done and is doing in our lives.*

And what exactly has God done? Paul tells us in the passage...

He's given **himself completely at the Cross, actually *dying* for you.**

God dying on the cross brings us life.

It is in the shedding of his blood that we are saved.

Maybe you are thinking *that sounds barbaric and backwards! Why does someone or something need to die for me to live. I'm not sure I like that thought or principle!*

If that is what you are thinking, then let me give you this gentle challenge...This principle is woven into the fabric of reality and you already know and believe in this principle and live like your life depended on it! *Really?* Yes, because it is how food and eating works. In order for us to live something must die. For our life blood to keep flowing, the life blood of animals or the life blood of plants and vegetables (sap) needs to be shed.

What Paul, the Bible, Christianity and Jesus himself claims is there is a spiritual dimension to this as well as a physical one woven into the fabric of reality. Jesus dying in our place for our punishment addresses and deals with our sin and separation and us turning our backs on God whether in the younger son or older son way. Jesus dies to save us younger and older brother types. Jesus dying is how we are reconciled with God. That's how he brings us home.

And this is the message...you are, I am, more flawed, fragile, insecure, needy, broken, self-centred and sinful than we care to think but in Christ we are also more loved, cherished, wanted, welcomed, valued, precious and forgiven than we dare to hope! That truth taking into the very centre of our beings is life-changing and offers us a way to live that is honest, humble and hopeful. This is the message that (as the passage says) keeps us grounded and steady in that bond of trust with God because...it's based on the goodness, loving-kindness and saving work of God in Christ.

That's what you in Colossae have and are finding out

That's what I have found and am finding out says Paul.

That's what many of here have found and are finding out and many in DMains have still to find out.

As Paul says...**by giving himself completely at the Cross, actually *dying* for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence. You don't walk away from a gift like that! You stay grounded and steady in that bond of trust, constantly tuned in to the Message, careful not to be distracted or diverted. There is no other Message—just this**

one. Every creature under heaven gets this same Message. I, Paul, am a messenger of this Message.

PRAY