



# From Hostility To Holiness

[1:21-23]

Chris Bullard

*“And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister” (1:21-23).*

In 1977 my wife and I made our first trip overseas. The first stop on our trip was Athens, Greece. We disembarked our 747 jet and rode the shuttle bus to the Athens International Airport terminal building. We stood in line with hundreds of other passengers waiting to present our passports. As we approached the counter I noticed the sign over our lane read “ALIENS.” My first response was, “This can’t be my lane. I’m an American citizen. I’m not an alien. Aliens are people who sneak across the border from Mexico into Texas!”

But in Greece I was an alien. I was separated from my own country with all of its rights and privileges. I was about to enter a country where I had no rights and privileges because I was not a citizen. I was an alien.

Early in his letter to the Colossians, Paul reminded the Colossians that they were now citizens of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. But that had not always been true. At one time they had been aliens to that kingdom, without any of the

rights and privileges of divine citizenship. In fact, we, too, were not just citizens of another kingdom, the kingdom of darkness, we were enemies of God and His kingdom. We were not just foreigners as far as God was concerned; we were hostile toward Him.

## THE STATE OF OUR REBELLION (1:21)

Paul speaks first of the state of our rebellion: “And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds” (1:21). Most in our world live under the delusion that the vast majority, say 95 percent, of all Americans believe in a divine father figure, a kind of master of the universe, who passes judgment on moral, ethical, and faith-related matters, but who is also a friend in our time of need. But here is Paul’s fundamental statement: “You were against God. You were enemies of God. You were in a state of hostility against God.”

If Gallup has correctly read the mood of our country, then most Americans would say, “I’m not against God. I don’t like church much, but I’m not against God. I say my prayers from time to time.” But the Bible states clearly that until you know Jesus, a state of war exists between you and God, whether you have heard about it or not, whether you realize it or not.

Why does a state of war exist? For two basic reasons. First, because we are basically evil people. “Evil” is probably a word we never used of

ourselves until we became Christians. “Evil” and “wicked” are words we apply to other people but *never* to ourselves. We have said, “No one is perfect,” and, “I’ve tried to do my best.” We have never said, “I’m a wicked person,” or, “I’m basically an evil person.” But in fact, that is what we were until we became Christians.

The reason people never apply these words to themselves is that the wrong standard is applied or the wrong person is asked. People ask themselves, “Am I evil?”, and are prompt to answer, “No, of course I’m not! I’m as good as my neighbors and probably a bit better. Those criminals I read about in the papers are the evil people.”

Why is everybody evil? Paul says that people are “hostile in mind.” When men think about God, they are always messed up in their thoughts. They think, “God won’t mind if I lie this one time,” or, “God doesn’t expect me to be *that* puritanical.” But God *does* mind; God does have expectations. We become enemies of God in our minds because we justify to ourselves what God Himself condemns.

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Paul says people are “engaged in evil deeds.” Jesus had said, “. . . the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Men are hostile toward God because God hates their sin. That sin produces alienation between men and God. No fellowship, no relationship, no outpouring of blessing exists because man’s wicked works and hostile thoughts have come between him and his God. Isaiah said, “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” (Isaiah 59:2).

### **THE SOURCE OF OUR RECONCILIATION (1:22)**

Second, Paul speaks of the source of our reconciliation. “Yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (1:22). Once we were enemies of God, alienated from Him because of our thoughts and actions. Even though we were hostile toward God, He still loved us. He set about to reconcile us to Himself through Jesus’ death at Calvary.

Many well-intentioned people believe and teach that Jesus did not have to die. That was just one option open to God the Father, they say. But the Bible is clear: The death of Jesus was necessary if our reconciliation to God was to become a reality.

Why did Jesus have to die? One reason is found in 2:13, 14:

And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Paul said that it took the death of Jesus *to free us from the bond* that once stood against us with all of its legal demands. Why was that important? Because law, any law, brings us under condemnation. Every time we try to relate to God on how well we have obeyed the commands of some law, we find ourselves doomed because we end up disobeying that law. Breaking the law puts us under a divine curse.

Paul said,

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for “The righteous man shall live by faith.” However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,

so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:10-14).

By becoming human and going to the cross, Jesus took the curse that rightfully should have fallen upon us. That curse that comes from living under a law we cannot keep could not have been removed without our Savior taking our death upon Himself. By dying for us Jesus not only shattered the curse, but He also shattered the law that kept us condemned before God. No longer do we have to relate to God by perfectly keeping some law. We are saved from being under a curse continually, for none of us can keep any law perfectly.

Jesus not only had to die to abolish the claims of law upon our lives; He also had to die *to act as a propitiation for us*. John said,

[Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Where the NASB has “propitiation,” several other translations use “expiation” or “atoning sacrifice.” None of these terms are very familiar to readers today. What does John mean?

The concept of propitiation carries with it two fundamental ideas: the appeasement of wrath and the satisfaction of justice. Husbands, have you ever forgotten your wife’s birthday or your anniversary? If you did, you soon discovered that your wife was angry with you. What did you do to get back on her good side? Did you send her flowers or take her a gift? Maybe you cleaned up the dinner dishes or babysat with the children while she went out. Whatever you did to eliminate her anger against you was a propitiation.

This helps to explain the appeasement of wrath as we apply it to our relationship with God. God created you to live a pure and sinless life, to model His image before the world. When you rebel and fail to obey His commands, you incur His wrath. The judicial anger of a holy God stands against you, and you need a way to turn that wrath away from you. Jesus died for that purpose.

Next let us notice the satisfaction of His justice. The great question of the Bible is not: “How

can a loving God send anyone to hell?” but, “How can a holy God maintain His holiness, uphold the integrity of His perfect law, and at the same time not send an ungodly, unholy man to hell for all eternity?” The divine dilemma was to devise a plan whereby God could remain entirely holy and at the same time save us. In His great grace God found a way. He allowed His sinless Son to volunteer to die in our place.

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All of us have broken the commandments of God. God says that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). We deserve to be punished for our wrongdoing. However, God sent His Son as a substitute for us. Peter said, “[Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, . . .” (1 Peter 2:24). Christ took our punishment. God’s law requiring punishment for sin was honored. Our penalty was paid in full, and we were reconciled to God. No longer was His wrath against us. Nothing else needed to be done to satisfy His justice.

The death of Jesus was no accident. Neither was it one of many options that God had. If we were to be reconciled to God, Jesus had to be made flesh and blood like us and then take our death penalty upon Himself. Calvary alone is the source of our reconciliation.

### **THE STIPULATION OF OUR RECONCILIATION (1:23)**

Third, Paul mentions in our text the stipulation of our reconciliation. Paul says this recon-

ciliation to God is ours “if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister” (1:23). Our final presentation to God at the end of time as people who are free from accusation and condemnation does not happen automatically. As we became Christians, we did not step on to a spiritual escalator that will automatically usher us into heaven at the end. Nothing is automatic about the Christian life. Nothing is inevitable about being fully and finally saved. There is a stipulation, Paul says. We must continue in our faith, not giving up on the hope held out in the gospel.

The idea that once you believe, you are saved forever is not the gospel. The gospel is that God has provided for your reconciliation to Him through Calvary. That restoration of relationship to your Creator is a divine gift, but you must continually claim it. Salvation is not a one-time experience; it is the result of a lifetime of decisions to put your trust in Jesus and not in yourself .

At Colossae, the Christians were being encouraged to accept a religious system that did not make Jesus the sole source of reconciliation to God or of eternal life. The false teachers said that Jesus is only one of many steps to be taken to return to God the Father. Paul said they were wrong! What Jesus did at Calvary is all we need; we need no one or nothing else to bring us into full relationship with God. Our hope is in the cross of Jesus—period. That is why Paul exhorted these Christians to hold on to the hope that is held out in the gospel.

We need to hear this exhortation ourselves. How many of us began the Christian life by grace but are trying to make heaven by perfectly keeping law? Some have decided that reaching heaven depends on being perfectly obedient. Some teach that we are now under a new law that must be flawlessly kept in order to be saved just as the Israelites had to keep the law of Moses to be saved. That is false teaching. That makes my hope on Judgment Day my perfect obedience, not the work of Jesus at the cross.

Authentic Christians live a transformed lifestyle. We are no longer enemies of God in our minds; we no longer participate in evil behavior. Instead, we live lives marked by holiness and

godliness. That transformed lifestyle is *not* the basis of our hope before God. The only reason we can have the hope of heaven is because Jesus took care of our sin problem at Calvary, making reconciliation possible by His physical body through His death. We sing:

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.  
Edward Mote

## CONCLUSION

Where is your confidence? What is the basis of your hope of eternal life? Is your hope in your obedience? Is it in some set of laws or teachings that you think you can keep perfectly? Or is your hope in what Jesus has done for you?

If your confidence is in Jesus, you can know that God has reconciled you to Himself. If your hope is in anything other than the life and death of Jesus, you will live your life in uncertainty and die with your hope in a doctrine or a practice that cannot save you.

I close with a passionate passage of Scripture written by Paul:

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

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## *Food for Thought*

“We seldom fail because we don’t know what to do—but because we don’t do it.”

“Don’t allow your sorrows to turn you into a skeptic.”

“We can see our setbacks as adversities or adventures; confinements or challenges; dungeons or doorways.”