

Series: Christmas at Grace 2021

Sermon #2

God & Sinners Reconciled

Colossians 1:15-22

Kevin Maurice – December 5, 2021

Good morning! My name is Kevin Maurice and I'm the youth pastor here at Grace. And this morning we just sang a Christmas hymn, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing", that's quickly become one of my absolute favorites. This week as I've studied the Bible and I've prepared this sermon, I've been listening to this incredible song over and over. And it continues to take on greater significance.

**Hark! the herald angels sing
'Glory to the newborn King.'
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled."**

God and sinners reconciled—these lyrics are saturated with substance and they're full of what we call Christology—Christ-ology—the study of Jesus Christ.

And today and leading up to Christmas over the next few weeks we're going to study passages from Scripture that reveal more and more of the awe-inspiring truth of who Jesus is.

So, today, if you would, please open up your Bibles and turn with me to the Book of Colossians. We're going to be in chapter 1 starting in verse 15.

Now Colossians 1 is one of the most striking and dense Christological passages in the entire Bible. And as we study it together, we're going to reflect on and come to see these three essential truths about who Jesus is. We'll see why Jesus comes to earth, how Jesus comes to earth, and what this means for us. How Jesus comes, why He comes, and what that means.

Now, if you would, please join me in standing as we read the Word of God together.

Starting in verse 15, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones

or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 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.”

Thank you. Please have a seat.

Why Jesus Comes

Have you ever spent Christmas far away from someone that you love? Maybe you were in college and you just couldn't make it home for the holidays, or you were working in a different city or state or even another country and you can remember that one Christmas Eve that you just spent all alone.

I have a friend who is an army officer, and it's not uncommon for our servicemen and women. He spent last Christmas morning on base Face Timing with his family as they opened presents. And that's hard—being physically distanced. It's hard, especially this time of year.

Because when we're apart, there's also this emotional disconnect, right? And we know what it's like to be emotionally distanced, especially over the past two years. We were distanced from friends and family, even from our church community. And we made the best of it. We had Zoom birthday parties, small groups, and game nights. I even attended an online wedding and an online funeral. And while technology can help bridge that gap, the emotional disconnect is still there. It's still felt.

Perhaps most difficult of all: maybe you have been or you still are separated from someone that you love by something more profound. That first holiday after the divorce or the first Christmas after the loss, the death, of a loved one. And now there's an empty chair at an empty spot at the table. It reopens that wound, or it cuts in a way that you didn't remember that it could. Physical apartness, emotional distance, relational separation: these things hurt and they cause terrible pain.

But what about one level further? What about one level deeper? What about a separation that's not just about miles or loss? What about spiritual separation? And not just from another person, but from our own Creator, from God, from the person that we were created to know and be known by. Our relationship with God, the relationship that we were created to know and enjoy forever—we are more than just distant or disconnected. We're actually even further from God than that.

This is the root and fundamental issue of every soul. We are separated from God.

And we just read this. You can return to the text and look again at verse 21: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” This is our posture as human beings toward our Creator. The Bible tells us that we don't just *do* wrong things—that's evil behavior, evil deeds. It's not only that we think sinfully against God, against our Creator—enemies in our minds. God's Word goes one step more and tells us that we are alienated from Him. It's our character, it's our identity.

To be alienated: the definition is to be permanently, persistently, irreversibly estranged; disconnected always, far away forever, separated unto death.

If you just surveyed the history of humanity, even just recently in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the fact that humankind is separated from God and that our thoughts and our behavior are bent toward evil is abundantly clear. But remember, it's not simply that our actions have done this. It's not just that our hidden inner thoughts are evil. The Bible is clear: humankind is sinful and broken because it's who we are. Deep down at our core, our standing is alienation from our Creator.

And we know this, right? We can feel it. We read about it and we listen to it. The media megaphone on our phones and TVs and computers tells us every day that there is something else that's wrong with the world. And so, we read these passages and others like it and we nod in agreement.

But so often, what we tend to do is to think about this as being “out there.” When we think about the bad, scary world, it's about those people; not so much me, but about them.

And so, I'd encourage you as you read this passage to understand that this is also about us. You and I are absolutely a part of this alienation that the Bible is talking about. We usually overemphasize the sins and the brokenness of others and we minimize our own. But a good measure of spiritual maturity is the acknowledgment and the grief over your own personal

separation from God. If we only ever think about sin of others, if you only read the Bible as a window to a broken world rather than as a mirror to a broken person, we're missing the point.

The truth is that we are all alienated, sinful, and separated. Merry Christmas, by the way.

So, the question arises—What do we do about it? How do we fix this? How do we make it right? And so, this is what the world does. This is what people do and have done for all of history. People try to save themselves. We try to be better, we try to do good things and be more religious. We try to claw our way back to God. Or we convince ourselves that—You know what? We're actually not that bad, we're not actually in need of saving.

But the truth is that we are not able to make things right. We'll never be able to un-alienate ourselves. Because we are the ones who are enemies in the first place. We're not in a position to be able to reconcile this broken relationship.

In 1985, famous musicians from around the globe gathered together for a concert called Live Aid. It was a fundraiser for food in Africa and a general call for world peace. And they released this song called "We Are the World." Some of you may remember it. And everybody—EVERYBODY—was on this track. And they released a music video and you could see all of these people who were singing this song. There was Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Tina Turner, Paul Simon, Billy Joel—big names, right? And together they sang:

**We are the world
We are the children,
We are the ones who make a brighter day
There's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day, just you and me.**

These musicians were acknowledging, "We know it—yes—there is something wrong with the world. But if we can just work together, if we team up and we try our best and we can be better, we're the ones who can achieve this and make a brighter future, and we'll even save ourselves.

If you watch the music video though, there's one person in this group who is clearly reluctant to be there. He looks grumpy, his arms are folded, he's barely singing, he's not

enjoying himself. He's standing as far back as he can, he's mouthing the words. And you can tell he doesn't even know the words. It was Bob Dylan.

And after the song was released, a reporter asked him why he wasn't promoting this huge hit. It seemed that he was distancing himself from this song.

And Dylan told him, "To tell you the truth, I don't think people can save themselves ..."
Bob Dylan was a good theologian that day. Because he was right—we can't save ourselves. We cannot. We are alienated. We are enemies and evildoers. What hope could we possibly have to pull ourselves out of this?

And that is why we have this manger. This is why Jesus came to earth. We have one hope. Only one. And it's not better behavior or more righteous thinking. Our hope is the person of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus comes. He is our only hope to be reconciled to God. And so, how can He do this? How is Jesus able to reconcile us?

How Jesus Comes

Colossians 1 shows us. This passage weaves this beautiful tapestry of Christ as the foremost, supreme, ultimate, and preeminent person of the entire universe. "Preeminent" is this incredibly rich, thick, theological word, and it contains so much. And verse by verse we're exposed to this transcendent truth that Jesus alone is preeminent.

Verse 15 tells us that Jesus is the image of God, the firstborn over all creation. He is not just *like* God; He's not just like a projection of God onto the earth; He is God Himself. He is over all creation and He comes to earth.

That's what we just sang:

**Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate deity**

God among us. This is called the Incarnation. It's the central miracle of the Christian faith—the Incarnation of Jesus, that God Himself became a human being.

Sixty years ago, 1961, Russia sent the first man into space, Yuri Gagarin. When he returned to earth—whether he actually said this or not is unclear—but Soviet propaganda credits him as declaring, “I went up to space, and I saw no god up there.”

And in response, the author C. S. Lewis wrote an article saying that if there is a God who created us, then we wouldn’t discover Him simply by going up into the air. Because God wouldn’t relate to human beings the way that a person that on the second floor of a house relates to someone on the first floor. God would relate to us the way that an author relates to his creation, the way that Shakespeare would relate to Hamlet. Shakespeare is the creator of Hamlet’s world and of Hamlet himself. So, Hamlet can only know about Shakespeare if the author reveals himself within the play. So too, the only way to know about God or to know God would be for God to reveal Himself in creation—in His creation.

And the Bible tells us that this is exactly what He did. That’s the Incarnation. Now everything in the Hebrew worldview into which Jesus was born was violently opposed to the idea that a human being could be God or that God could be or become a human being. The Jewish people would not speak the name of God; they wouldn’t even spell it out or write it out fully. And yet Jesus Christ—in His birth, by His life, by His claims, and by His resurrection—convinced His closest Jewish followers that He was not just another prophet telling them how to relate and find God, but that He was God Himself come to relate to us and find us.

And because He is God—because that’s who He is—verse 16 reminds us that He is the Creator, He’s the ruler of everything: “By him all things were created: in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...”

Do we understand that the universe was created by Jesus? He created everything visible and physical. Planets and stars and galaxies and solar systems. And then if you just zoom into our little speck, our little corner of the cosmos, on this planet, every mountain, every stream, every blade of grass and every tree—the blood that flows through our veins, the bodies that those veins run through—He created all things visible and physical. And that means He’s sovereign over it. He’s the ruler of it because it’s His.

Jesus also created the invisible. This is referring to the spiritual realm, things we cannot even see, things we don’t fully understand. But what we do understand is that Jesus rules that realm as well. Because He’s not the means or the instrument of creation; He is the author and the destiny of it.

In verse 17 it continues this line of thought and we see that “He is before all things, and in Him all things are held together.” Creation itself is ordered in Jesus Christ.

Bertrand Russell, a famous British atheist—he was a mathematician and philosopher—acknowledged that the order of the created universe is the single most difficult issue for any atheist to address. The things that we call “natural laws”—math and physics, these Newtonian laws of motion, the detail that water will freeze at 32 degrees Fahrenheit--the fact that there is order in creation belies the notion that all of this just by chance.

And as Christians, we know that it’s *not* by chance, it’s by a Creator. Jesus is the reason that we have a cosmos and not chaos. He’s the reason that there’s order and not oblivion. And every atom, every molecule, everything in all of creation is held together in Him—not by gravity of some force, but by the person behind all of those things—by Jesus Himself.

And now this Christological passage crescendos in verse 18: “He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” So, He’s firstborn over all creation and He’s firstborn from the dead. We’re going to come right back there in just a minute, but here we come to this great word—“... that in everything He might be preeminent.”

Jesus is preeminent. He’s supreme in all creation, Creator and sustainer of all things. It’s all by Him, it’s all for Him, it’s all about Him. From the birth of the universe, the passage of time to His life and death and resurrection, and then finally, glorification. He was there at the beginning, He’s writing the story in the middle, and He will be there at the end.

Pastor Tim Keller says it this way: “**The birth of Christ is the central event in the history of the earth—the very thing the whole story has been about.**”

This is how Jesus comes to earth. This is how He comes—as the preeminent person of all existence. And this preeminent person takes on flesh. And He becomes a vulnerable human baby, unable to do anything more than lay in His mother’s arms, stare up at the sky, and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed.

My wife and I have two-month-old right now. And being a parent of a newborn again has completely changed my understanding of the Incarnation. Because the babyhood is so startling.

The Creator of the universe was a human baby. And the more you think about that, the more overwhelming it becomes. The Infinite became an infant.

And this baby grows up and He becomes a man—“In Him God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, on earth, in heaven, making peace through His blood shed on the cross.”

Through His blood on the cross . . . The Creator Jesus, God and man, divinity Himself, stooped down. And He is born in a dirty cave, in a backwater town, and He is born to die.

From the first time that He opened His eyes, Jesus is on a specific, ordained trajectory. Those little hands that Mary held that first Christmas night would one day be pierced by nails. And His blood would spill and drip on the splintered wooden cross, made from a tree that He himself created. He will be murdered by people that He himself made and knows and loves. And then He's laid into another dirty cave.

And when He, Christ, the firstborn of all creation, was put into that tomb, that tomb became a womb. And when the stone was rolled away, He came forth as the firstborn from the dead, and He brought us with Him.

Born that man no more may die

Born to raise the sons of earth

Born to give them second birth.

That is why He came to earth. He did all of that to reconcile us, to undo the alienation. He stepped into His creation to do that.

And this is why only Christ can reconcile us—because of how He came to earth, because He is the preeminent person who created and holds things together. Because He is the firstborn of creation and He becomes the firstborn from the dead. To put it simply, Jesus had to be God for us to have peace with God.

Why did Jesus come to earth? Reconciliation.

How did Jesus come to earth? Incarnation.

So, what does this mean for us?

What This Means for Us

We're back now in Colossians 1, verse 21, right where we started. Remember, this is our identity: “We who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds”—that's who we

were. But we're told that "He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach."

God and sinners reconciled; brought back into a restored relationship. We've been reconciled by Christ's death, and now He presents us. And I love this detail from the passage. We don't present ourselves; He presents us—holy and blameless and free from accusation, above reproach. We have a new identity.

We used to do evil deeds, we used to be defined by that; Jesus says you are free from it, you're free from accusation, you're above reproach.

We used to be enemies in our minds; and Jesus calls us blameless. We're not separated anymore.

We're not alienated any longer; Jesus says, *You're mine and you are holy.*

Not in and of ourselves, not because what we started doing or stopped doing, but because God Himself has done that for us and given us a new identity. That's the meaning of Christmas.

Christmas means that we are so lost, so unable to save ourselves, that nothing less than the birth and the death of the Son of God Himself could reconcile us. That's Christmas.

So, as we approach this Christmas season, as we draw near to December 25, in our lives, let's worship and adore Jesus Christ preeminent. Let's remember to celebrate the day that He was born, absolutely; but let's remember that we celebrate the day that He was born to die for us.

So, this Christmas season, maybe you've picked up one of the December devotionals that Pastor Ray mentioned. Make that reading that we're doing as a church part of that morning or evening, part of your adoration of Jesus Christ.

Spend time in God's Word this Christmas season. Take time to memorize maybe this passage from Colossians 1, verse 15 to 22. Write down one verse each day, memorize one verse each day, spend time with Jesus in His Word. Let the preeminent Creator be preeminent in your thoughts as you meditate on Scripture.

You'll be listening to lots of Christmas music for the next twenty days, some of us maybe a little unwillingly. But as you sing songs in your car or at home or all the time, pray as you sing them. Think through some of those words that are so rich with meaning and theology. And thank God for the gift of Jesus which has brought us back into relationship with Him.

Grace, let's not waste the opportunity that we have this year during this holiday season when our affections are so easily drawn to distractions. Let's live into this Christmas season as an occasion to know and worship and adore our Savior.

A few months ago, I read the story about the author Dorothy Sayers. She was British. She was one of the first women to go to Oxford University. People often noticed—one of the things about her was that she was a very tall person. And she enjoyed writing mystery stories. She became very famous for her books about a detective named Lord Peter who was an aristocrat who like to solve mysteries. But he was single, he had few friends, he lived alone, and he was often depressingly lonely.

And then one day, in the middle of the book series, a woman named Harriet Vane just kind of shows up. Harriet appears on the scene, and she's one of the first women to go to Oxford University and she's a fairly tall person. She's a writer of mystery stories. And she and Peter meet and they solve a crime together and they fall in love and they get married and they go on to live this wonderful life.

Now what's going on here? Here's what happened: Dorothy Sayers looked into this world that she created and she peered into this character that she knew and she created and she loved, and she saw Lord Peter's pain, and she saw his loneliness. And as the author, his creator, she loved her creation so much that she wrote herself into the story just to save him.

And that's what Jesus has done for us. That is what Christ has done in His creation. He looked into our world—the world that He made—and He loved us. And so, He wrote Himself in. And that's the Christmas story. That's the Christian's story.

You and I—we were distant, we were far away, we were separated from our Creator. And we couldn't just journey back to Him. So, He came to earth to bring us to Himself--God and sinners reconciled.

Would you please pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we come before You humbled by who You are. God, Your Word is such a gift to us, and it reminds us of this incredible, overwhelming truth of who You are and Your power and Your majesty. And God, You loved us. You loved us enough that even in our sin and our brokenness you still loved us. So, You came to us so that we could be reconciled.

Father, we thank You for Your Son. We thank You for Jesus. And we pray that this Christmas season as we worship and adore Him that we would know Him more fully; that we would come to know more and more about who He is and who You are and who You've created us to be.

Father, we love You and we praise You. And we pray these things in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.