

Who Can Say These Things

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[0 : 00] What I've titled this is, Who Can Say These Things?! Colossians 1, 21-27. And let's read through it quick. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you.

To make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for the gathering of your people here today. Pray that you would keep my words, my mind, from saying anything that's not true.

[1 : 24] May your Holy Spirit guide my words, and guide the understanding of everybody here. And pray that everyone would be more in love with Jesus at the end of this than they are right now.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. So, how do you know when a leader is a good leader? What makes somebody worthy of being followed?

Worthy of being obeyed? Worthy of being trusted when things get weird and dangerous? What kind of leader can point out your problems and mistakes and bad habits?

And where the only correct response is, thank you, how can I do better? What kind of leader can rightfully ask you to give away your personal possessions and your wealth?

Is anyone else getting regular text messages and emails from political organizations where \$15 from you, yes, you, can set our country back on the right track? Do you believe any of them?

[2 : 26] Maybe do some investigation and decide, this one, this might do some good, I'll give here. This one looks stupid and wasteful. I'm not going to do that. But what kind of leader, when he or she says, give or go or change or take this course of action that might very well cause you extreme inconvenience or cost you money or the loss of status in your community, what kind of leader has the authority where the only and obvious answer is, yes?

Some examples from history come to mind. I think of in the 5th century B.C., there was a Roman army that was trapped by an enemy. Emergency measures were needed.

In the Roman Republic, they were governed by elected officials and authority was spread out among a number of people. But in times of emergency, the officials could decide to appoint a dictator who had absolute authority to take charge and handle the emergency.

They appointed a man named Cincinnatus. And as you might guess, Cincinnati, Ohio was named after him. In 16 days, Cincinnatus took charge of the Roman army.

He rescued the stranded force, resigned the office of dictator, and returned to his farm. 16 days. He didn't use his position to make himself rich or to execute his enemies.

[3 : 57] He probably had some. Or to start an unnecessary war to gain even more glory for himself. He did the work he was asked to do, and then he returned to where he came from.

If you were a Roman soldier or a Roman soldier's wife or child, and you could pick a man to fight under in the next war, would you go for Cincinnatus? I think I would.

You know he's not going to waste the lives of his soldiers. You know he's not going to prolong the fighting longer than necessary while he sits in his tent sipping wine and eating figs. That's not him.

He's shown that he's a man of important action and not a vain man fighting for his own glory. I think of Napoleon. He earned his soldiers' trust by spending time with them. He was known for inquiring, how's your food? How's your tent? How's your equipment? How are your horses? And then actually fixing the problems that his soldiers asked him to fix. He genuinely cared about his soldiers and they would follow him anywhere. And of course he won on the battlefield and nothing gains a soldier's trust like winning.

[5 : 02] So what are the characteristics of leaders in your life that have made you happy to follow them or resentful of having to follow them? When I started reading this passage closely to prepare for today, I began getting uncomfortable with some things.

Verse 21 points out that my nature is to be hostile to God and to do evil. Verse 22 tells me that I need to try to be holy. Verse 23 points out that I'm susceptible to weakness in my faith. Verse 24 tells me that suffering is likely and it's a good thing. Verses 25 to 27 tell me that I had no way of figuring things out on my own and that God has to reveal all the important information to me. Not a good start for stroking my ego. This isn't good. Then, I know what it's like to be prodded and poked and pestered by a Christian leader who was ultimately self-serving, building his own kingdom and abusing the sheep.

So sometimes I have a reflex, very likely some of you do too, that when someone, apparently even the Apostle Paul in Colossians chapter 1, when someone encourages me to reflect on these things, I want to stiffen up.

[6 : 16] Instead, I want to reflect on all the times I've tried and failed to do these things or I reflect on the resentment I have towards people, sometimes well-meaning people, who've tried to help me or have tried to manipulate me with the scriptures.

So who are you, Pastor So-and-So, to point out my problems and tell me how to fix them? Who are you, television preacher, to tell me where I should send my money? Who are you, Paul of Tarsus, to tell me that I can't solve the important questions of my life on my own?

This passage can be seen as pretty audacious, especially to a modern, individualistic, American mind. Last week, Jeremy led us through verses 15 to 20 and answered the question exactly who it is that's teaching us these things about ourselves.

Jesus Christ is the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, and by himself created the pathway by which all of creation and sinners can be reconciled to God.

Jesus, through Paul, is saying these things to the Colossians and to us. He does have the authority to say these things. So, let's look again at verses 21 and 22.

[7 : 31] 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. So, this reconciliation made possible by the one who perfectly bridges the gap between God and humanity, Paul tells us this reconciliation that Jesus is performing has been specifically applied to the believers at Colossae.

and, did they need to be reconciled just because they had been caught up in the net with all the badness? All the bad things that happened? You know, boy, this place sure is messed up. Lots of terrible wickedness going on. Makes it really hard for someone like me to make my way in life. I sure wish someone would do something about it. Are they all innocent bystanders to all the wickedness in the world?

Paul, of course, wouldn't hear of anything like that. Whoever in Colossae was the most God-fearing, the most pious, maybe there were some Jews there who were faithful to the Old Covenant throughout their lives, and as soon as they heard the gospel, they believed.

[8 : 43] They received Jesus, they were received into God's family. Whoever the best person in the church at Colossae is, Paul says, you were alienated from God, your thoughts and mind were hostile to God, and your evil deeds revealed it.

This could be a little hard to take. I'll take myself as an example. My parents taught me to believe the Bible and trust in Jesus. I don't remember ever consciously thinking, I hate God, I want nothing to do with God, I want to do evil in order to offend God, I want to stick my finger in God's eye. I've never deliberately taught those things. As far as I can tell, people around me find me to be helpful, agreeable, and generous. But, I don't need to think too long or too deeply to see some ugliness.

I remember an incident when I was in third or fourth grade. Now, I've never been a violent person. I've never been in a fist fight. I have run away from at least one fist fight.

I hate violence. One day, I was standing in the hallway at school, and a couple of girls from my class were walking down the hallway, and I got the impulse, I'm going to trip her.

[9 : 57] I stuck out my foot, she went splat onto the floor. She caught herself, she didn't get hurt seriously at all, and I lied.

I said it was an accident. And because I didn't have a reputation for troublemaking or violence, I was believed. So Carrie, if you somehow happen to hear this someday, I'm sorry.

Honestly, I do think about this about once a month. It's, I hate that that happened. Another time, in about sixth grade, a girl in my class from a very wealthy family received a beautiful leather jacket as a Christmas present.

I was already jealous of her because her family took long vacations in Mexico every winter. she lived in a giant log cabin house with a real bear skin hanging on the wall.

And they had an amazing lake cabin with speedboats and jet skis. And to top it all off, she really was one of the nicest kids I knew when I was growing up. She sat right in front of me in class.

[11 : 04] She had turned around for some reason and the elbow of her jacket was sitting on the top of my desk. I took the permanent marker in my hand and I marked her jacket.

The jacket was tan, the marker was purple. I will never forget because to this day I feel bad about it. So Emily, if you somehow happen to hear this someday, I'm sorry.

The last example I'll share is the worst one of the group. I was 15 or 16. We were at a resort where my family had rented a cabin and I was in a common room with a couple of other teenagers I had just met there.

There was a boy and a girl. No one else was in the room. The other boy and girl knew each other and they got into an argument with yelling and cursing and name calling and then the girl was leaning against a table or a counter like this and the guy started kicking her like stomping on her upper leg on her thigh hard.

He did it four or five times maybe more and she was crying. I was horrified. I hate violence and I very much wanted him to stop.

[12 : 23] What did I do about it? Nothing. I stood there silently and let it happen. I could have stopped the abuse of the weak by the strong but I was too afraid of what might happen to me.

I was afraid to do the right thing. Revelation chapter 21 tells us that the fearful will be judged by God. So I've told all three of my sins.

Mike, do you want to take your turn? Those are the sins I'm comfortable sharing. So what's my point? How deep do any of us really need to look to find times when we felt a thrill committing even a small act of violence or felt a violent rage at someone even though we may have been too weak or afraid to act on it or felt a jealousy that poisoned your thoughts about someone for years and years?

Read through the Gospels. and compare the darkest things that have ever passed through your heart to Jesus. He's the perfect representation of God and the perfect representation of everything that humanity is supposed to be.

None of us can say that my mind has always been tuned to God's frequency. We've all committed thoughts and acts of hostility toward God and mankind. Verse 22 says, You, he has now reconciled in the body of flesh by his death.

[13 : 49] Jesus has reconciled us to God by the death of his human body. The very real humanity of Jesus was tortured and executed and ultimately separated from God.

From the time of his arrest until the moment he died, Jesus never cried out in anger or astonishment or revenge or agony. The only thing that caused him agony was the thought of being separated from the Father.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That's the only time Jesus cries out seemingly in agony and anguish out of control. That was what horrified him.

His sacrifice pleased the Father and made a way for people like us to be forgiven and reconciled to God while not ignoring our sin. But, human sacrifice?

Really? I thought we modern people didn't go in for that anymore. What an ugly religion that requires a human sacrifice to please God. Well, ancient societies almost universally killed animals and sometimes humans to appease their gods.

[14:57] Why? I think it's because they knew they were vulnerable. They knew they had messed up and the gods might be angry. Or they knew that there was too much they didn't know.

Is the river going to flood this year? Are we going to be defeated by our enemies? Is that plague in the next valley going to come here next? Or think of the Roman Empire at its peak and the gladiators.

They arranged games in which real people would really fight to the death. Why? Yes, to entertain the people, but the games were dedicated to the gods.

as criminals and prisoners and sometimes completely innocent people, including Christians, were slaughtered in the arena. The hope was, may Mars give us victory in battle.

May Ceres give us an abundant harvest. May Cloakina keep our sewers clean and flowing freely. I did not make that one up. They had a goddess of sewers named Cloakina.

[15:55] So what I take from this is humanity knows in its bones that bloodshed and death are the consequences of being alienated from God.

And ignorant people have tried to remedy this in any way they could. God confirms this in the law he gave to Israel. There were animal sacrifices constantly. Why?

Was God genuinely pleased by the smell of a burning goat carcass? No. Did that really take people's sins away? No. But God wanted to teach his people that sin is messy and costly and not easily resolved with, hey, sorry about that.

Hey, no problem. Don't mention it. Everything's cool. That's not how sin gets resolved. Verse 22, he is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

So this verse tells us what the goal is. Why did he do all this? In order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. Jesus presented himself to the Father on the cross with our messy, costly, destructive, and very intentional sins so that he could reconcile us to the Father in his death.

[17:13] His desire was to present us, to set us before the Father and before the world, put us on display, holy, blameless, and above reproach. Holy means we are set apart, devoted to God.

Blameless means, think about this, blameless means we never do anything wrong. That's an amazing state to be placed in. That's astonishing.

Above reproach means any accusation against us evaporates before it can get to God's ear. and he only knows about the goodness of Christ when he thinks about us.

That's amazing. So what's missing here as far as the goal? What does Paul not focus on at least in this present passage? He doesn't say that the primary goal of salvation is to snatch you from the fires of hell or to take you to heaven with him after you die.

Of course, the Bible has teachings on these things, where and how we will exist after this life. and the destinies of believers and unbelievers, and we should believe those teachings.

[18:19] But all of that is apparently secondary in Paul's mind, at least at the moment when he's writing this. The primary goal, the main effect, is to present you and me to the Father, and that when the Father inspects us, he finds nothing that displeases him.

Did you inspect yourself a few minutes ago when I suggested it? Did you find any acts of violence even in your heart? Did you find any acts of cruelty? Did you find any theft?

Did you find any times when you successfully lied to cover up your sins? Did you find any times when you selfishly refused to protect the innocent? I'm confident in saying that no one listening to this can pass his or her own inspection.

But Jesus says, believe and embrace what I did on the cross, and I will pass the inspection for you. That's the promise of the cross, and his resurrection seals it.

His resurrection completes the circle, declaring to the world that yes, he does have the power and the authority and the compassion to make good on that promise. He is the perfect leader who does have the authority to say these things.

[19:31] Go forward to verse 23. If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

So Paul, maybe surprisingly, puts a condition on all these good things. He says, we will receive this reconciliation and we will pass God's inspection if we continue in the faith, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.

This is a little difficult, and to save time, I'll summarize the dilemma. We have passages of scripture that teach that Jesus does everything for us, and once we have exercised faith in him, we are eternally secure, and there's no possible danger of ever being separated from him.

Then we have passages like this one, which seem to suggest that if we slip, all can be lost. What do we do with this? I don't have the insight or the skill to resolve how to interpret all these passages, but I do notice one thing that I hope will be helpful.

Did Paul know much about any individual people at the Church of Colossae? He didn't. He had never been there. He didn't personally preach or teach to anyone there, or learn who had real faith, or who might have a false faith, or who might be wobbly.

[20 : 58] Certainly, Paul knew that all those types of people could be there in Colossae. Here's what I want you to notice. He gives the same advice to all of them. Continue believing in Jesus. Don't shift from the hope that Jesus provides.

Make sure your faith is ongoing. Don't think of your faith as a one-time event, where you cross the threshold and never need to think about it again. For many years, I was taught that getting the moment of salvation exactly right was crucial.

If we doubted whether we were truly saved, we were encouraged to look back at that time and examine it carefully. Was I really sorry for all my sins? Were there any sins I didn't repent of? Did I really want Jesus more than my sin? And if you were satisfied that you got it right, then you were eternally secure. If not, you were encouraged to examine your heart more thoroughly, to search out more and more sins that maybe you haven't repented of yet, or to try to decide if you mean it enough this time to really get saved.

Paul doesn't dwell at all on examining and dissecting the moment of salvation. What is Paul obsessed with? Last week, Jeremy took us through Paul's obsession in verses 15 through 20.

[22 : 15] Paul says, He 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 himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. Paul reminds them that the Savior they have believed in is more trustworthy and powerful than they even realized when they became believers.

The Savior you have believed in has all the power in the world to keep you safe and keep you reconciled to God. Stay confident in him. Do you see anything else around here that offers reconciliation, security, love, like Jesus does?

Paul says, Paul says, no, there's nothing else. Stay confident in your Redeemer. Don't try to be confident in how good you are at believing in him. Focus on the Savior.

[23 : 32] Finally, if I haven't dragged out this point too long, faith is a gift. Our hearts and minds are by nature hostile to God. The very ability to trust in Christ is given to us by God.

Let's look at Ephesians chapter 2 real briefly. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast. Even our faith in the grace of God had to be gifted to us, and we are obligated to believe. In the same way, our continuing day-to-day faith, the faith that keeps us steadfast and not shifting like Paul says, that's gifted to us too.

Every day, and we are obligated to continue believing. I can't fully resolve that paradox in my mind how both of those things are true, but I believe they are.

Let's move on to verses 24 and 25. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.

[24 : 52] So here Paul says two things that at first glance might appear to be throwing some shade on Jesus, but because we already know what Paul thinks about Jesus, that's impossible.

That's an impossible interpretation. We have to look for an interpretation that doesn't contradict what Paul said a few verses earlier. So in verse 24, Paul says that he rejoices in his sufferings for the sake of the Colossians, and that in his flesh he's filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

So is there any way that Paul believes that Christ's suffering on the cross needed help, needed an assist? He means something else. And I don't think this is too difficult to untangle.

I believe the key is that the church is Christ's body. The church is Christ. God's sovereign plan was for Jesus to ascend back to heaven following his resurrection, but for his presence to be just as real through the presence of his church, his body, on earth.

On the cross, Jesus opened the door to God, and that door cannot get any more open than it already is. But God has ordained that the body of Christ, the church, stay here as a witness, sometimes suffering, to the grace of God so that the word of God can be made fully known all through the world.

[26 : 11] Jesus' affliction on the cross was lacking in the sense that it didn't spread the news of the gospel all around the world by itself. That work still needed to be done. God's wise plan was for Christ in his people to take on that phase of the plan.

then, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

To them, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. So, this big buildup, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed.

For people who are very familiar with the gospel and the New Testament in general, these verses can lose some of their punch, some of their oomph. Jesus came to save not only Jews but also Gentiles.

We know that already. That's one of the most basic things about the gospel that's very quickly and easily learned. So, why this big buildup, this big escalation from Paul?

[27 : 27] Why does he use the word mystery? The meaning of mystery here does not mean something that is extremely difficult to understand, something that requires extensive study of ancient texts and hikes up a mountain to ask a guru who won't give you a straight answer anyway when you get there.

What mystery means here is something that God has decreed but has chosen not to make known until a certain time. Paul here tells us that this mystery is no longer a mystery to those that God has revealed it to.

Two quick things about this mystery. The fact that the riches of the glory of the mystery has been given to the Gentiles.

The Jewish nation had been one of the most religiously isolated and stubborn groups in the world. They, almost unique in the world, were rigid monotheists. They believed in one God, only one God, would never compromise on them.

They did not play well together with the long lists of gods and goddesses from other nations. And although some Gentiles did convert to become Jewish, they remained religiously isolated, waiting for the son of David to make them great and powerful again.

[28 : 37] The big reveal was that when Jesus rose from the dead, the power of that resurrection transcended the laws and the expectations given to Israel. Jesus rose from the dead on behalf of all humanity, not just the Jews.

The riches of God's glory are offered to all men and women of every nation who will confess faith in the resurrected one. This mystery wasn't terribly hard to understand. It just hadn't been made known until it was time to make it known.

Secondly, the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. This is the ultimate goal. The life and power of the resurrected one, the one through whom and by whom the entire universe was created, the one to whom all powers and authorities owe their allegiance and submit to, his life and power are placed in those who confess faith in him.

Therefore, we have hope of glory. The glory that God had placed in us at the creation and that was lost at the fall is being restored one person at a time. So Jesus invites you to join him in the new creation.

He opened the way for sinners to confess their need for a savior and to trust that his sacrifice and resurrection prove that he has the power and compassion to make them part of his new creation.

[30 : 03] So today, I ask you to consider what kinds of things have passed through your heart over the years. What kinds of actions have you taken in your life? Think about having God carefully inspect you or if you would rather trust Jesus to pass the inspection for you and place your trust in him.

So, let's pray. Father, thank you for this time. Thank you for your word. We trust that your Holy Spirit is active here today helping those that trust in you to increase their confidence in you and that any who are not believers here today would be persuaded to be in a very short time. And we pray for the Martinsons and others who are traveling at this time. We pray for their safety and ask that you bring them back to us soon. In Jesus' name, Amen.