

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 275

The Ministry of Reconciliation

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 8th June, 2008**

Text: *"And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouable in His sight" (Colossians 1. 21, 22).*

Have you noticed, in a few of our recent Bible readings during the services, how often we have something like this: Ye once were ... but ye now are? It seems to have come in quite a lot. Last Lord's day evening our reading ended like this: "*Ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls*"; "*Ye were ... but are now.*" And the week before we had, Ye once were ... but now are: "*But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.*" Then again in that same chapter, "*Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens.*" You see a change, a gracious change from what you *once were* to what you *now are*. Really, beloved friends, that is simply what conversion is – I mean, real conversion, Holy Ghost conversion. It is a change; it is a turning round. Like the old minister in Sussex who turned right round while he was preaching, with his back to the congregation. That is what conversion is, he said: that complete turning round.

So right at the beginning, beloved friends, I want to press you on this: whether that gracious change has taken place in your life, because either it has or it has not, and it is a solemn thing if you and I die and this gracious change has never taken place. It is the work of the Spirit of God. It is a turning from death to life. It is a turning from sin to God. It is the essence of real repentance. And I believe if it has taken place, then we shall know it. I say that without fear of contradiction. Now let me explain it like this. You may be severely tried about it; you may be tempted; Satan will try you, he will tempt you, and you will perhaps think at times it was not real. You will perhaps think at times it was not clear enough, deep enough. There may at times be a shadow over it. But really, beloved friends, if the Lord in love and mercy has changed your heart and life, you will know it, and the Lord will see to it that you know it. Now is there a difference between what you once were and what you now are?

John Newton once said, “I am not what I should be; I am not what I long to be; I am not what one day I hope to be; but I *know* I am not what I once was.” And how many of us in our early days could not be cheated out of this! I wonder if we were cheated out of many other things, but we could hold fast to this: “One thing I know” – we felt we did not know much; well, we do not now. We felt there were many things we had to know and we did not know them. “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.” We knew we could see things we never saw by nature: the vanity of the things of the world, the blessedness of the people of God, the solemnity of eternity, the attraction in Christ. May your heart be searched by the Holy Spirit of God this evening as to whether you know that gracious change that God performs in the hearts of His people.

So once again here, this time not in Ephesians or Peter, but in Colossians. It is this point: what you once were; what you now are. “And you, that were sometime” – we would say, *once*, or we would say, *formerly* – “you, that were sometime” – you that were once – “alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” So you have it here again; you have it here once more: you were once; you were sometime ... ye are now – this difference that grace and only grace can make.

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” So the subject this evening is *reconciliation*, and it is central to the glorious gospel of the grace of God. Often I am tried just which chapter to read [in the public reading]. In the end, I read 2 Corinthians chapter 5, because there the gospel is spoken of as “the ministry of reconciliation.” And then a verse or two later, the gospel is described as “the word of reconciliation.” So our great need as sinners is to be reconciled to God.

You know what reconciliation means. There are two people and they are at variance. There has been a quarrel; there has been a disagreement, so there is something between. Reconciliation is when things are made right between them and instead of being enemies, they become friends. Instead of being alienated, they are brought together. Often reconciliation is accomplished through a person, a mediator, one who comes between, or to use the Old Testament term, a daysman (Job 9. 33), one who is acceptable to each one of these two who are at variance.

And he is able to resolve the difficulty and to remove the cause of the quarrel and bring them amicably together.

That is reconciliation, and it is our great need. Why? “You, that were sometime alienated.” So we are alienated from God. We are not friends with God. The Word of God tells us very clearly, “The carnal mind is enmity against God.” That is our mind. Read it carefully: not *at* enmity. It is that, but our carnal minds *are* “enmity against God.” They are “not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” Now we are born as aliens, and we grow up as aliens, and we live as aliens, and unless grace prevents, we die as aliens. During the last war, if a person was born in Nazi Germany, he was born an alien to Britain. And you and I, born in sin and shapen in iniquity, are born as aliens to God. We are not in a right relationship. It is a solemn thing to be against God and to have God against us. And where will it end eternally if we live and die at enmity against God, alienated from Him, at a distance, separated?

“You, that were sometime alienated.” That is every single one of us by nature, alienated through sin, and enemies – “enemies in your mind by wicked works.” So the enmity is in our minds, in our hearts, and it shows itself in our life and in our behaviour. “Thine’s alas! a lost condition.” O this awful state! The Word of God is always pessimistic about human nature. People do not like pessimists, and they do not like to read a book that is pessimistic, or to read a newspaper article that is pessimistic. Well, concerning human nature, the Word of God is completely pessimistic. You say, Is the Word of God a pessimistic Book? No, because it gives the answer, it gives the remedy, it sets forth the way of reconciliation. But it is pessimistic about us and our standing, and what we have done, and what we will do, and what we can do, and what we cannot do. It is completely pessimistic. But this is the glorious gospel, “the ministry of reconciliation.” And that reconciliation is in a Person, the Person of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This is the ground of reconciliation. You know the little hymn we sing:

“Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”

That is why the Son of God came.

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” Now how did He do it?

Well, of course the thing that caused the enmity, the alienation, was our sin, our guilt. It came between. It was a barrier between. It was an obstacle. It was a cause of the enmity. And the only way there could be solid reconciliation between a holy God and a guilty sinner was if the cause of the enmity, the sin of the people of God, should be removed. And that is what the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ did when He lived and died.

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death.” Really, this is rather an unusual way of putting it, a strange way of putting it, that reconciliation was made by Christ “in the body of His flesh through death.” We must always remember, beloved friends, that when the epistles were written, and when the prophecies were spoken, there were personal things at that time and special faults and wrong doctrines and false teaching, and often some of these expressions are addressed to those things that troubled the church at that time. Now it seems, looking at the background to the Epistle to the Colossians, that some of them did not seem to have very clear views of Christ. Did He really die? Was He really a Man, or was He an angel, or were angels involved in this, or did He take a body, and was it really a body of flesh, and did He really suffer? As far as I understand it, that is the reason for what seems to be this rather unusual, this rather strange expression: “In the body of His flesh through death.” But O we do need to be reminded that the Saviour is a real Man. He became a real Man, and He is still a real Man this evening in heaven, though true Almighty God. That sacred humanity that He took is His for ever. That sacred humanity, body and soul, is inseparably united to His divine Person. We must be clear that He is true Almighty God and a real Man in one glorious Person.

But in simple language, “In the body of His flesh through death” – it is the sufferings of the Lord Jesus on the cross; it is at Calvary when He died. In its simplicity, that is what it means. This is where reconciliation was made, reconciliation accomplished. When He cried, “It is finished,” the whole church of God was eternally reconciled to Him by His death. Why, the death of Christ satisfied a holy God. He turned His anger away from these sinners. There is no cause for enmity now. The precious blood that He shed removed all the sin and guilt of His people. There is nothing now between the sinner and his God. It was a perfect work, a complete atonement. “For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are

sanctified.” This is the basis of reconciliation between a holy God and guilty sinners.

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death.” In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle brings in this great work of reconciliation as part of the work of the Lord Jesus as a great and glorious High Priest. “Wherefore in all things it behoved Him” – we do not meet that word very often; it means it was needful, necessary – “it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest.” Why? “To make reconciliation for the sins of the people.”

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” But this work of reconciliation has to be made known personally. This word has to be fulfilled personally in the lives of all those who are going to go to heaven. We need it to happen in your life and mine because of our enmity, because of our alienation. “And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled.” This is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we are born again, He teaches us our need, and our great need is to have a right relationship with God, which we have not got; to be friends with God. We are not friends; we are enemies. We are at enmity to Him and we are brought in measure to know it and to feel it.

How can we be reconciled to God? How can we be made nigh? How can we be no more strangers? How can we be no more enemies? Well, as the Holy Spirit leads us and teaches us, He brings us to the throne of grace to confess our sin and the sin of our enmity, the sin of our alienation, and to pray that it might be forgiven, and to pray that it might be removed. And though this is the Holy Spirit’s work, yet still the only ground of reconciliation is in the body of Christ’s flesh through death. That is, this must be our only plea; this must be the foundation of our hope; this must be the ground on which we come: that I as a guilty sinner might be made right in the sight of God. “A foe received a favourite, an alien made a child.” If it is ever to be so, it must be through Christ the Mediator, Christ standing between, Christ’s righteousness, Christ’s precious blood, that I might not be rejected as an enemy, but accepted, “accepted in the

Beloved,” accepted as a friend, accepted as a child. O do you know anything of it, do you seek it, do you pray for it?

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death.” Now let me remind you of some of those very sacred truths that we read in the chapter this evening. He “hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.” So we have to preach man’s need of reconciliation, and the way of reconciliation, and the sinner’s welcome on mercy’s ground through the blood of Christ to be reconciled. He “hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.” They were imputed to the Saviour to bear them and atone for them and bear them away. “And hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” The language of the chapter emphasises the ground of reconciliation. The apostle speaks this word – I think it is one of the deepest words in holy Scripture; we need to tread as on holy ground. “He hath made Him” – the Father hath made Christ – “He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that *we* might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” I have never yet dared, never yet ventured to preach from that. O but there is an amazing depth there! “He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” But Paul says this is “the word of reconciliation.” This is the basis of the ministry of reconciliation.

Now what about this conclusion? This touches us personally. “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ.” A preacher is an ambassador from heaven. In the old days of real prosperity such as the Evangelical Revival in England and some of those glorious times in the Highlands of Scotland, the people used to come to church or chapel in that spirit. They were going to listen to a message from heaven. It is said that when M’Cheyne opened the vestry door and began to ascend the pulpit in St. Peter’s, Dundee, there was a kind of trembling and sobbing in the congregation. They felt they were being brought face to face with heaven and God and eternity, and they were going to hear their sentence. O that there were more of this hearing today!

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ” – that is, those to whom He has committed the word of reconciliation. Now if an ambassador goes from a king or queen to another country, when he delivers the message

exactly as given him from the reigning monarch, he speaks with the complete authority of that king or that queen. The more he brings in his own thoughts and his own words, the more he dilutes and weakens the message and its authority. “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ.” Now listen to this: “As though God did beseech you by us.” That sounds strangely on our ears at first – God beseeching sinners. “As though God” – Almighty God – “did beseech you by us.” Now what did He beseech them? “We pray you in Christ’s stead, *be ye reconciled to God.*”

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death.” Now then, the result of that work of reconciliation performed by Christ on the cross, made known personally in the heart by the Holy Ghost, “to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouable in His sight.” Now what an emphasis we have here! It is not altogether easy to distinguish between holy, unblameable and unreprouable, but I believe there are one or two different things meant here.

The work of Christ in reconciliation is to present His people *holy*. That is, to present them to God, to present them to His Father. That lovely word we sing:

“He will present our souls
Unblemished and complete
Before the glory of His face,
With joys divinely great.”

He “is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.” “To present you holy.” Well, there cannot be any alienation or enmity if this sinner, so sinful in himself, is holy in Christ. Why? Because all his sins are atoned for. Why? Because he stands complete in the righteousness of Christ. That is reconciliation in all its fulness.

“To present you holy and unblameable” – as the word means, without blemish. You remember when Naaman the leper was cleansed, he went down as a leper into the River Jordan seven times and when he came up the seventh time his flesh was like the flesh of a little child. Now older people have a few blemishes, but you know that smooth skin and beautiful flesh of a young child. “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.” “Holy and unblameable.” This is reconciliation. “Holy and

unblameable.” “Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it ... that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” That is what *unblameable* means.

“Holy and unblameable and unproveable.” Now I know there is the sanctifying effect of the death of Christ. There is the sanctifying effect of the work of reconciliation, and through that sanctifying effect as a child of God walks before the world and the Lord upholds him and keeps him, he will be unblameable and unproveable. The Lord will say to them, “Ye are My witnesses” – that is in the sight of the world; but the apostle here is speaking in the sight of a holy and heart-searching God. He cannot find one flaw, one spot. That is in Christ – justification. It is not the work of the Spirit in sanctification in his heart. “Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee.” “Holy and unblameable and unproveable ” – in the sight of God unproveable.

Well, it means that no-one can condemn. So the apostle throws out that challenge: “Who is he that condemneth?” Well, we know the answer to that; it is easy. There are plenty who condemn. The holy law of God condemns us. Satan condemns us. At times the world condemns us. Our own conscience condemns us. “Who is he that condemneth?” “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.” This is what this *unproveable* means. “Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.” “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth.”

“Holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight.” What about these last three words: “In His sight.” That is the thing that matters. We may be something in our own sight. We may be something in the sight of our friends. We may be something in the sight of our enemies, if we have any. But what are we in the Lord’s sight? This glorious standing here, reconciled to God by the blood of the cross, it is “holy and unblameable and unproveable *in His sight*.” O what a mercy, and what a word, and what a gospel!

This, beloved friends, the ministry of reconciliation, is the glorious gospel of the grace of God, and this is what has been preached and contended for at Bethel over the years of its history. We hope it always will be preached and contended for as long as this building stands, and if the Lord will to the end of time. O our prayerful desire is that many of

you, that all of you if the Lord's will, by the Spirit might be brought inside this word personally, experimentally, to the honour and glory of God and for your everlasting salvation.

“And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight.”