

You Are Complete in Christ *Paul's Letter to the Colossians*

Jesus is the Image of God *Colossians 1:15 – 20*

1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...¹⁸ and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself will come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:15 – 20)

Introduction: Donating My Kidney

Last year at this time, I was recovering from surgery. I had donated one of my kidneys to my wife's brother. Paul, my brother-in-law, was at a crossroads. Healthy kidneys normally filter out toxins from your bloodstream. Those toxins make your urine yellow. They need to leave your body. But Paul's kidneys weren't filtering those toxins out. So his skin had an unhealthy yellow tinge to it. Being Chinese, he looked especially weird. The lactic acid that your muscles give off when you're sore after a workout was not leaving his body, so he felt tired and sore. Potassium, which we need in small quantities, was building up in his bloodstream, and unfortunately potassium is what is injected into death sentence prisoners in large quantities to send their hearts into cardiac arrest. These poisons were circulating in Paul's body and he was in danger of heart failure.

Although dialysis was an option, it wasn't a good one in his case. His dad wasn't eligible because he had had heart surgery before. My wife Ming was an option but she had already delivered each of our two children by C-section, and I felt like that was enough for her. I was the best option. I was 34, so relatively young. And male kidneys are bigger and could filter more blood.

So we went to the hospital. I had never had surgery before, so I was nervous. The surgeon had told me what would happen. I would become unconscious. They would turn me on my side. He would make an incision right above my belly button, through my abdominal muscles, or what little I have left after my swimming days. They would put two catheters into my side which had small scissors at the ends. When the surgeon put his hand into my gut, the catheters would snip my left kidney loose, and it would roll right into the surgeon's hand. Then they would stitch me up and put the kidney in Paul's right side, under his own kidney. So, as they sedated me, I thought about all that, and I wondered, 'Am I going to die?!?' I prayed, 'Lord...' and then passed out.

Meanwhile they did all that. As soon as the surgeon put the kidney into Paul, it began to filter out the poisons. He peed yellow, as he should. Within 48 hours, his creatinine levels dropped from 13 to 2, and 1.6 is normal. So when I got up and saw Paul, he looked great. His skin color was already looking normal. They didn't cut through much muscle for him, so there wasn't that much incisional pain. It was like getting a new oil filter in your car. He was feeling better than he had felt in many months. But I felt awful. Until they switched me from morphine to vicodin, I was in pain. But what happened in him was amazing.

I think that's a good parallel because all of us have a poison in our bodies, a disease called evil or self-centeredness. We need healing from it. The reason why God became a human being named Jesus was to ACQUIRE our disease. Second, it was to have a human body in which to DEVELOP THE ANTIDOTE to the disease. In the physical body of Jesus, God resisted every shred of self-centeredness living in that body, pushing it all the way to its death. He CLEANSED THAT HUMANITY. And by raising Jesus from the dead, God gave Jesus a fresh, new humanity perfectly fused with the divine. And God made Jesus into an organ donor and blood donor spiritually. By connecting us to the resurrected Jesus spiritually, God can now place in us a cleansed spirit, a new spiritual heart, the beginning of a fresh new humanity that is just like Jesus because it comes from him. To sum up: In Jesus, God worked out the healing to our disease so that we could all share in that healing.

Relevance

Why is this relevant? You are all going to have to struggle with this question, if you haven't already. Because when you deal with sin in your family, sin in the world, sin at BC and you see all of the evil and injustice and brokenness

that is around us, when you really open your eyes and see it and let it affect your heart, you will wonder two questions: ‘Who are we? And who is God?’ Of course, that won’t be the first question you ask. At first, it’ll take the form of more immediate questions, like ‘What is God doing about this brokenness?’ You’re going to wonder, ‘Why doesn’t He interrupt the story from the outside? Why doesn’t He bust down the door and bring an end to it all?’ And then the implicit question will become explicit. You’ll ask whether there is any hope for human change. You’ll ask then about God’s character. Who is He? What is He really doing about this?

Overview

We are looking again at Paul’s letter to the Colossians. This was a letter Paul, this early Jewish Christian leader, wrote while he was imprisoned by the Roman authorities for preaching Jesus, not the Emperor or the other Greco-Roman gods. The reason Paul gives is that Jesus is first. Look at 1:15 – 18. **SLIDE 2** I’m going to highlight all the occurrences of the concept that Jesus is ‘first.’ 15 He is the **image** of the invisible God, the **firstborn** of all creation... 18 He is also **head** of the body, the church; and he is the **beginning**, the **firstborn** from the dead, so that he himself will come to have **first place** in everything.’ The terms image, firstborn, head, beginning, and first place indicate the same thought. Jesus comes first. Let’s unpack the thoughts here.

Jesus, the Blueprint of the Creation: v.15

Look at v.15: ‘*He [that is, Jesus] is the image of the invisible God.*’ Being ‘made in the image of God’ is what Adam originally was. **SLIDE 3** It was a title. In the ancient world, if a king put his image – like a statue or engraving – up somewhere, it meant that he reigned there. So for God to put His image in Adam and Eve meant that He was making them His representatives to tell the whole world that as they ruled over the world, so God ruled over the world through them. We were supposed to be ‘in the image of God.’ But before Adam and Eve, from all eternity, **SLIDE 4** Jesus was the true Image of the invisible God. Jesus had this relationship with His Father. He was the exact representation of His Father. Jesus was THE Image, and humanity was patterned after him. THE Image vs. being in the image **SLIDE 5**. So in reality, **SLIDE 6** we are in the image of the THE Image. We are patterned after Jesus. We are children of God patterned after the one Child of God.

Illus: What does that mean? (QUESTION) How many of you have had other adults say to you, ‘You look like your father,’ or ‘You look like your mother’? When Ming and I had our first child, our son John, he clearly had features from both of us. He had Ming’s eyes, and my nose. In some sense, he was made in our image. And then when we had our second child, our daughter Zoe, we saw that she had my wife’s eyes and...there was my nose again! But what if it’s not just physical? What kind of love do I want with my children? It’s similar to the love that is stamped from the love between my wife and me. We were all designed to be loved by the Father and to respond in love back to the Father. In that way, Jesus is who we were meant to be. The whole world is actually patterned after Jesus. Why? Because the Father wanted all things to be in a love-relationship with him in much the same way that Jesus the Son was in a love-relationship with Him. He is who we were meant to be.

That’s relevant to us. If you’re confused about what you are meant to do in life, you were meant to be like Jesus. **SLIDE 7** (QUESTION) How many of you would take your laptop and open the DVD tray and put your cup of coffee in it? Actually, there was a person who did that. She called into the help line and said, ‘My coffee cup holder doesn’t come out anymore.’ Can you believe it? Using a DVD tray to hold your coffee? That’s what it’s like to use something in a way that is much less than what it’s created for. What were you created for? You’re meant to be like Jesus. You’re meant to relate to God like Jesus does. You’re meant to reflect the image of God like Jesus is the Image. That is your noble purpose. Everything else is selling yourself short. When you turn away from Jesus, you’re cheapening yourself.

SLIDE 8: In creating, God patterns creation after something already within Himself. He takes a relation that is within Himself already and He extends it for us. He takes a love that is within Himself already and He extends it to us. Everything in this world the Father has stamped with His Son.

SLIDE 9: So we are meant to be way more – much, much more – than who we are. And we know it. Because the problem is that we separated ourselves from God. **SLIDE 10:** Later in v.21, Paul says we were ‘alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds.’ That’s pretty inhuman. What is the world like? It sucks. Just pick up the newspaper. Read about Pakistan, Kenya, the problems we’re trying to address in the U.S. The world stinks. And yet we long for a better one. The Christian story tells us the world wasn’t created that way. The classical Christian writers said that we lost two things when Adam and Eve fell into sin: innocence and power. Psychologists say that

we have a feeling of guilt that is universal. We have lost our innocence. And we have lost the spiritual will to do what is right, instead of what is easy, as Dumbledore would say. For example, we produce enough food to feed the whole world. But we don't. The United Nations tells us that it's not a technological problem, or an ecological limit. We just don't have the political and spiritual will to do it. So people starve. We have lost our innocence and power. We've become inhuman.

Jesus, the Blueprint of the New Creation: v.18 – 19

SLIDE 11: But, Paul says in v.18 that God is making all human beings like Jesus again. Jesus is not only first in the original creation; he is the firstborn of a whole new thing God is doing. Being the firstborn, by the way, in Jewish thought means to be the head, and in a special sense, to be the King. It doesn't mean that Jesus was a created being, and was just *chronologically* first of all the rest. It means that he is *positionally* first in governance and first in importance. *'And he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself will come to have first place in everything.'* Jesus is the first man resurrected. Paul says that he is the *'firstborn from the dead.'* This one from among us has attained a new kind of life. Yes, an immortal life. But it's also a new type of human life. When Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he came back as a new kind of human being, a perfected human being.

In my favorite portion of *The Lord of the Rings* series, Gandalf tells us who he is when he comes back. He led the Fellowship of the Ring, but he fell into a deep underground cavern in his battle with the greatest of all demons. Then as he conquered the demon, he died, and passed through death itself. But then he was sent back. At first, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli don't recognize him, because he is wearing a gray cloak. They see white robes underneath the gray cloak, and think he is Saruman the White in disguise, the wizard who committed treason and is against them. But then Gandalf casts off his outer grey cloak and his robes shine white, as if transfigured by the sun. They say, 'We thought you were Saruman; you are all in white.' And Gandalf says, 'Indeed, I am Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been.' (J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, Ballantine Books, 1965, p.125). In a similar way, God becomes a human being in Jesus and becomes who we should have been and who we now can be. Jesus is who we should have been. Even though we've all messed up, Jesus is who we are meant to be. In that way, he is much more than Gandalf. Jesus is the one who experiences God as Father to the fullest because he was, is, and always will be the true Son of God. What if that's what it means to be the best of all human beings? He's even the one *who makes it possible to be who he is*.

How did God do this? He put all of Himself in Jesus, according to v.19: *'For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him [as a human being], and through him [this one human being] to reconcile all things to Himself.'*

So the question of your identity is bound up with the question of God's identity. I was an atheist slash agnostic growing up, and looking back, I thought I had a sense of who I was but I really didn't. For me, for many years, my sense of identity was built around being an athlete. For you, your identity is built around accomplishing something, doing something. You're performance oriented, but you have no real purpose. Or your identity revolves around your friendships, maybe who you're dating or want to date, so you have no anchor. Or, your identity is built around a failure that you're ashamed of, a hurt that just won't heal, a person who wronged you, so you have no real happiness. Or maybe you have no identity; you're just a bunch of masks. Like Shrek said, 'Ogres are like onions.' You have layers, masks; peel them back and what's in the center? Nothing.

Why Did God Do This? To Reconcile All Things to Himself: v.20 – 22

So how can we know God the way Jesus knows God? **SLIDE 13:** Let's look at v.20 – 22, 'and through him [Jesus, this one human being] to reconcile all things to himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. 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.'

Now you probably think you know what that means. You think it means Jesus died to pay the 'penalty' for your sins so God could legally forgive you. That's not true. The tendency of the West has been to try to get back the law and order of the Roman Empire. Do you know why we like the TV shows 24, Law and Order, CSI, Boston Legal, The Practice, The Shield, Judge Judy, and The People's Court? And the older shows NYPD Blue, Starsky & Hutch, Charlie's Angels, Miami Vice, CHiPs? Law and order of the old Roman Empire. So the tendency of Christians in the West, to some degree Catholic but especially Protestant, has been to see Jesus as the answer to divine law and

order. What happens when someone breaks the law? God's justice needs to be done, and that person needs to be punished. But Jesus the Son of God took that penalty instead of us by dying instead of us. So now if we believe in Jesus, instead of trying to do good works to make up for bad works, we can be forgiven. But if that's all that happened, don't you have to ask, 'Why didn't Jesus go to the cross when he was five? Why wasn't Jesus born onto the cross? Why was it important what he said and did? If all that's important is his death, then what's so important about his life? His life is basically irrelevant because it's so abnormal and unique.'

To make this crystal clear, I want to present you with this chart [SLIDE 14]:

	WESTERN Prot	EASTERN Orth
What framework?	Legal (judicial)	Ontological (being)
What is human sin?	Wrong actions	Wrong condition
When did Jesus deal with human sin?	At his death only	His whole life, culminating in his death
God's wrath goes from...to...?	Father to Son, or God to God	Jesus' divine nature to Jesus' human nature
Jesus is the	Victim	Victor
God changes...	His mind	Jesus' humanity, then ours
What do we get from God?	Forgiveness	New humanity, renewed image of God
Our reconciliation with God is...	In the mind of God	In the physical body of Jesus
Jesus saves us from our...	Punishment	Evil
Can we address evil & social injustice?	No	Yes
Gets us into the	After-life	Mission-life

If the framework is a legal framework, then human sin is wrong actions. How did Jesus deal with our wrong actions? He died for them, because God had to inflict a penalty on someone, otherwise He wouldn't be just, so He inflicted pain on Jesus. So God's wrath goes from Father to Son. So what does Jesus save us from? Our punishment. What do we get from God? A legal sense of forgiveness. The judge issued the verdict and someone paid it, so the judge is happy. What changes for us? God changes His mind. How so? Because there's no anger left over. Notice that nothing changes about us. We're still the same people with the same criminal inclinations. So where is our reconciliation with God? It's in God's mind. It's just how He sees us now. Now here's the kicker: Can Christians address evil and social injustice? NO. Why? Because if God has not changed us, then the evil is still there. God can deal with guilt, but not the evil that caused the guilt. Jesus can pay the penalty for human misdemeanors and felonies, but he cannot do preventative work of reform and transformation. And finally, Jesus gets us into the After-Life. The emphasis is on the next life. Not on this life. This world can go to hell, evil can fester and spread, but hey, as long as I've got my after-life insurance, I'm set. I don't even have to give a damn.

If you grew up in a Protestant church, what I'm going to say to you now will sound *really different*. You've already heard something different when I said that Jesus is who we were meant to be, or that Jesus makes us like himself. Are you ready for this? Are you really ready? Let me take you back to the Eastern Orthodox view, which is earlier than the Protestant and Catholic views, and closer to the Jewish view of Messiah. **SLIDE 15:** You need to make a critical shift, otherwise your understanding of Jesus will be skewed, and your image of God in a broken world will be skewed.

The basic shift is getting out from a legal framework to an ontological or 'state of being' framework. Sin is not just wrong actions, but a wrong state of being. Something happened to our very beings that needs spiritual healing, spiritual antibodies. So how did Jesus deal with human sin? When Jesus showed up, he came to contract the disease, to get the virus, to let that crap course through his veins. As Jesus, God entered our broken humanness, our needy humanness, our self-absorbed humanness. He took it all onto Himself. (QUESTION) How many of you believe that Jesus' body craved sexual satisfaction? Physical comfort? How many of you believe that Jesus' tongue

was like ours, prone to speak vicious things about others? How many of you believe that Jesus' hands were like ours, wanting to take a sword and plunge it into the body of a Roman soldier? How many of you believe that Jesus had a mind like ours, prone to think private thoughts apart from God? But he always, always did one thing. When his own humanity wanted to just have an easy life, Jesus said, 'No, my life belongs to God.' When his own humanity wanted to lash out at his enemies, Jesus said, 'No, my life belongs to God.' When his own humanity wanted to sin, Jesus said, 'No. I belong to God.' He constantly took his own humanity and redirected it to God, to receive the love of God to the fullest, to love God absolutely.

I've often wondered what that was like for him. We have very little idea what it means to resist the evil and self-centeredness within ourselves, because we give into that self-centeredness fairly early on. Like how many of you guys are virgins not because you've resisted temptation, or is it just because you've not had the opportunity? That's the difference here. Like how many of you choose *not* to go shopping when it's offered you, and instead, give that money to children in poverty'? The only way we know how strong our own evil is, is to resist it. And the longer we resist it, the more we feel it. If you read the saints of the past, they were really aware of their self-centeredness because they were pushing so hard against it. We're not really aware of our self-centeredness because we pamper ourselves so quickly. We eat when we want, change the channel when we want, customize our play list and our refrigerator to our comfort. We have no idea how evil we can be because we protect ourselves from it. The closer the Ring got to Mordor, the stronger it became. It became heavier on Frodo. It put fear and hate in his mind. It poisoned him. We don't know the power of evil, because we give into it fairly early on. Jesus resisted it, every moment, all the way to the end. And Jesus couldn't just put it down. It was part of him.

(QUESTION) How many of you saw *The Passion of the Christ*? When you watched that movie and saw all the brutal torture thrown at Jesus on his way to the cross, that torture was there to persuade him not to go, to quit. That's why he would get up so quickly afterwards. It wasn't that he wanted more torture. It was that he would not be stopped by these obstacles being thrown at him. It's like how Sauron's Ring of Power had to fall into the fire to be destroyed, or how the pieces of Voldemort's soul had to be destroyed: Jesus brought the self-centeredness of his own humanity into a collision with the other-centeredness of God, where it was crushed. Jesus allowed himself to die at the hands of gross police brutality and a mockery of a trial with racial powerplays. That's crazy by itself. But even more intense is that he brought the self-centered, stubborn human being that he took on, and he took it to the limit, to the uttermost, dying not only for his friends but even for his enemies and for apathetic strangers.

Jesus wrestled with the self-centeredness he took on in human form without giving into it, and pushed it all the way to his death on a cross, where his blood was shed. That's the meaning of Paul's phrase, 'through death.' He totally outlasted human self-centeredness, even when it came from the human body he was wearing. He tired it out. He exhausted it. He took it all the way into the ultimate self-sacrifice. God's wrath goes from the divine nature of Jesus onto the human nature of Jesus. It doesn't go from the Father onto the Son. It happens within Jesus' body. And His wrath on human sin and His love for human beings are one in the same.

So in reality, Jesus deals with our *evil*, which caused our guilt in the first place. He doesn't just take away our punishment, he doesn't just deal with our feelings of guilt, although he does do that. He deals with our *evil*!! No one else does that!! Who else can do that? Can Judaism or Islam, which only give us laws? Can Buddhism, which only tells us to not desire anything? Can atheism, which only gives us social engineering that always seems to fail? Jesus gives us his new humanity, the fresh, healed, new humanity he has perfected in the love of God. Now yes, we will still struggle with our selfishness. But that is what makes it possible for us to talk about Jesus bringing about justice, because injustice is a product of human evil. And he doesn't just give us forgiveness. He gives us a new humanity. Jesus was resurrected from the dead into a perfected humanity, a fresh and new humanity. And now he can share the Spirit of his new humanity with us. Because what changes? Jesus' humanity, in his resurrection. And we begin to change also. Why? Because now, he can help us be who we were always meant to be: him. Jesus is who we were meant to be.

Illus: When I was a junior in high school, I found myself drawn to Jesus because in comparison with him, I was inhuman and I knew it. One of my friends said to me, "Let's go spend our spring break in Mexico." There was a group of Christian folks who were going to go there and do various things. I thought we'd be building affordable housing or new buildings or something: something I could see with my hands and be proud of, something that I could look back on and say, "That was a total guy thing to do, and I did that." Later I found out that 2,000 other Christians were going as part of the larger program. Well, we got there, a small town near the border of California

and Mexico, and I saw poverty like I had never seen before. People were living in cardboard shacks with three walls and an aluminum roof. We had to be really careful about drinking the water and being in the shower. And we didn't get to build any buildings. Instead, we played with kids and taught them little Bible lessons. In my mind, that was not what I came to do. All those kids cared about was, "Are you going to come back tomorrow?" They didn't care about the fact that I had big dreams and that I was going places. But it hit me that the love that the kids showed me was kind of like the unconditional love that God said He had for me; He didn't love me because of what I had done or what I thought I was going to accomplish. That was a lot for me to handle. I didn't want to be there anymore. I was taking a week off of swimming training almost in the middle of the season to be there, and I was risking my performance that season to care about these kids. But I looked around me and there were 2,000 people there who loved Jesus who were glad to be in Mexico and glad to spend their time that way. At that moment, my life just seemed so selfish and small it was unbearable. There was an evil deep within me that I didn't even want to see. I felt like I had wasted my life up to that point. That's when I said, "Jesus, I know enough about you that I'm ready. My life just feels small. My heart feels too small. It feels cold. Compared to you, I'm not fully human. Take my life and do what you want." Six years later, after being connected to Jesus for that amount of time, I moved into a Mexican immigrant community in a city called East Palo Alto, CA. East Palo Alto in 1992 had the highest per capita murder rate out of any city in the nation. I moved into the city in 1995, into this totally dilapidated apartment complex. It was run down and next to a freeway offramp and onramp, so drug dealers could get in and out quickly. Kids played around these huge dumpsters. The first night I was there, I laid in a sleeping bag on the floor. And although a couple of cockroaches touched my hand that night, and I didn't get much sleep, I felt more alive than I ever have before or since. My heart was burning; it was amazing. Why? It was because Jesus had given me a spiritual heart transplant, and his new heart was kicking in. I was being who I was meant to be.

Where does our reconciliation with God happen? Is this just a mental shift in God's brain? No. Our reconciliation with God is in Jesus' fleshly body. Why is that? Because Jesus reconciled one humanity – his own humanity!! – with God. Now, we can share in that through a spiritual connection with him. Can we address evil and social justice? ABSOLUTELY YES. Why? Because Jesus is God's way of healing humanity, and healing the planet. If He sent Jesus to transform us, then we have to address evil and social justice. We have to address broken families. We have to address global poverty, racial and ethnic tension, war in the Middle East, urban issues, broken school systems, corporations, EVERYTHING. So Jesus gets us into the Mission-Life of God. Here is the mission: Everyone who believes in Jesus is now sent into the world for God's good, for God's justice, and for God's love. Do you see why the 20th century for Protestants in America was the lamest century ever? In the 19th century, many Protestants led the way in abolition, women's rights, reaching out to inner city youth through the YMCA, addressing alcohol issues, and promoting widespread literacy. But over the course of the 20th century, Protestants turned against social justice and favored the legal framework exclusively. They turned evangelism into handing out an after-life insurance policy.

RESPONSE: I am calling you to shift your view from the standard Western Protestant view to the Eastern Orthodox view of Jesus and what his life and death meant. The Catholic view is kind of an in-between position which shares some, but not all, of the weaknesses of the Protestant view. This is pivotal. If you are going to even consider going on a summer trip to a slum community like Manila or Bangkok and you see what people can do to one another, you need to make this shift. If you're coming with us to New Orleans and you learn how people can manipulate systems, you need to make this shift. If you're going to be useful and effective on campus in the next month as we bring awareness and raise money for children suffering around the world, you need to make this shift!!!

God's Reconciling Justice: v.20 – 22

Let's expand on this. If you're like me, you're probably asking, 'Ok, this is all interesting, but if this is true, then why did it happen this way?' Why can't God just change the world out there? One difficulty when we talk about social justice is that we so easily call for *other people* or *systems* to change, but not ourselves. Conservatives think *individuals* need to change to become more hard working. Liberals think *systems* need to change to remove systems of oppression. Both have elements of truth, but again, as Leo Tolstoy once said, 'Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.' But that's exactly what needs to happen. If we were ruthlessly honest with ourselves, we know that's what needs to happen. And unless that one human being named Jesus really has transformed human nature itself, every form of social activism is really just an exercise in self-help.

Illus: That's why social justice efforts without Jesus sometimes result in overreactions: Paolo Freire is a Brazilian educator who wrote a book called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: the behavioral model for an oppressed people is the

model of their oppressors. That's why it's very common to see a people who were oppressed taking out their anger on someone else. Israel was oppressed and they now oppress the Palestinians. In Boston, lower income whites were oppressed and they oppressed minorities. Within oppressed communities, often men oppress women. Not only do we tend to do the minimum, we turn situations to our advantage.

You and I need to be fundamentally changed, not through positive thinking, wishing hard enough, or just changing our environment. Because people need to be restored back to who we were meant to be in here (inwardly). It's not just that we need a new environment, a new plan for politics, or better laws. Those things might be helpful, but ultimately, we first need to be made new again. Israel in the Old Testament is the best case study. They had a great environment, they had the best laws. But they still screwed up. And when you read the Old Testament to see how they messed up, it was mostly social injustice. There were other things here and there, but mostly, God was upset because they allowed social injustice to creep in. That's why they needed Jesus.

This gives us insight into God's character. What does God do in the face of human evil? Here's an analogy: As a father, if my son John hits his younger sister Zoe, I must do something. (QUESTION) How many of you have siblings? So you've probably thought about this. Now there are different kinds of justice. (1) Meritocratic justice is just 'you get what you deserve,' which means I would just punish him, and then my sense of justice is satisfied. Go to your room, take away TV and computer. Maybe even do some extra math problems. And if you keep misbehaving, I'll keep punishing you. And it doesn't matter to me if you behave or misbehave, because either way, my sense of justice – in this case, meritocratic justice – is satisfied. You get what you deserve. But shouldn't I care about how his character develops? About the quality of relationships in this family? (2) A second type of justice is distributive justice where you define equality in some sense. So maybe I'd let my daughter hit him back so things can be equal? There's a sense of fairness that way, too, but again, what about their character? Or, maybe I could define the minimum that they had to do to each other? But what about the quality of relationships in this family? (3) A third type of justice is restorative or reconciling justice. It's where justice flows from love, and justice is therefore defined as having the maximum quality of love in this family. And whatever steps are taken to correct people preserve that sense of family and aim to restore that sense of love.

God's justice is a reconciling or restoring justice that is based on love. God says, 'You get an opportunity to be fully restored to the family, and to who you were meant to be.' Look at v.20: 'And through him to reconcile all things to Himself.' God sent Jesus to reconcile all things – to Himself and to each other. So God is neither a conservative nor a liberal in the current sense that we would use those terms. Conservatives go for meritocratic justice. So it's about working hard, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, but if you're poor it's mostly your own fault – that type of thinking. Our choices do matter to God, but that's not everything, and God does a lot to help us. Liberals go for distributive justice. So it's about providing a minimum level of care across all people, and the minimum level of opportunity. That does cover some of the bases. But God is not interested in the minimum. He wants the maximum. He calls us into responsibility for each other, a responsibility so deep that it is marked by his very own love. He's interested in the maximum, the fullness. That's why Christians in Russia led by Leo Tolstoy, Christians in the Korean Independence Movement, Christians in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Christians in the Filipino Bloodless Revolution, Christians in the Poland's Solidarity movement, Christians in the South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Christians in the Eastern European Velvet Revolutions and other places are so powerful, because they didn't want the oppressors to just 'get what they deserved.' Nor did they just want the 'minimum.' They wanted a full reconciliation. Did Jesus himself do the maximum? Yes! He didn't just sit there and hold it against us, saying, 'You really should have been like me.' He didn't say, 'What's the bare minimum that I need to do here?'

What's the impact of that on us? Paul says it's to utterly transform us. We go from being 'alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds' in v.21 to being 'holy and blameless and beyond reproach' in v.22. It is our total and ongoing transformation.

Illus: When my friend Joe was in high school, he wanted to do the minimum. He was a total rebel. His parents thought he was such a problem that they sent him to a private school with a really heavy disciplinary program for an extra year of high school. He learned a few things from that, though, and came to Boston College, where at first it was about doing the minimum. Sometime during his college years, he absolutely fell in love with Jesus, and because of Jesus, started to want to do the maximum that God's love and justice called for. He majored in Psychology, graduated and served as an InterVarsity campus volunteer staff with me at BC, then got more ministry

training and went to Cambodia on a mission trip for 3 months. He applied to law school and is currently in law school in Chicago. After his first year, he did an internship with International Justice Mission, which is an organization of Christian lawyers providing legal advocacy to women and children trapped in sex slavery in Thailand and Cambodia. When the summer was over, Joe wanted to do more. He felt like he hadn't done enough with IJM, so he stayed for another semester, delaying law school. When he got back after a total of 6 months, the Chicago Sun Times featured a story on him, and the Illinois Bar Association gave him high praise for 'doing more social good in six months than many lawyers do in their whole careers.' Joe wants to do the maximum, according to how God sees it, as God as shown it in Jesus.

The three takeaways I'd like you to hold onto here are:

1. Jesus is the Image of God. He reveals who God is. RESPONSE: You need to stop believing in false gods.
2. Jesus reveals who we are meant to be. He reveals what it means to be human. RESPONSE: You need to look to him as the one true human being. He is the one from among us.
3. God's response to evil and injustice is love, and it's a reconciling and restorative form of justice. So to live in His justice, God gives the maximum to us and asks for the maximum. He doesn't just give us what we deserve, and doesn't call us to do that to other people either. He doesn't just give us the minimums and call us to give other people the minimums either. God loves in a way where He totally gives Himself, and then He calls us to totally give ourselves to others, by letting His love pour out through us, maximally. RESPONSE: So you need to stop believing in shallow analyses of injustice and evil, with minimum levels of justice.