

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

GOSPEL RECONCILIATION

Gospel Reconciliation for the Building of His Temple

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I. Introduction

Let's pray. *Father in heaven, we wait for you. We lift up our souls to you. We trust in you. The foolish, the wicked, the enemies of your kingdom - they all scoff and wait for your people to be put to shame, but we hold onto your promise that no one who waits for you will be put to shame. Make us to know your ways, Holy Spirit. Teach us your paths. Lead us in your truth. You are the God who saves us in Jesus Christ - the way, the truth, and the life. We wait for you, Lord. We are expectant to meet with you. Shepherd your people as we open up the Word, Lord. Shape us to live as your people in the world. Amen.*

Greeting

Good morning! My name is Ethan. I'm one of the pastors here at Union Church and if we haven't met, let's fix that after the service. I would love to meet you! If you haven't already turned to the book of Ephesians, I'd love for you to turn there and get your eyes on that text! We're in Ephesians 2:11-22.

We are in the fourth week of our series on the book of Ephesians, which is a little crazy to me. How is it October already?! This fall is going by much too quickly. If you've been in Ephesians with us for the past few weeks, you might remember that one of the patterns in the book is this idea of foundations and implications. In Ephesians Paul is taking us deep into the foundational theology of the gospel, and constantly making the connection between our theology and our practice by moving from the foundations of our theology to the the implications of our theology for daily life as gospel people. This is a theme that kind of frames the whole book and we see it repeated in smaller ways all throughout the book.

Reorient

Last week Pastor Kyle took us through Ephesians 2:1-10, and we looked at the way God graciously brings life where death reigns. It was the gospel clearly preached and it was so good! The passage from last week ends by saying, "...we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (10). Out of that verse Pastor Kyle said, "God saved you in Christ for good works that he has had prepared for centuries. What you do with this new life in Christ matters...He has saved you, raised you from the dead to new life, for a purpose."¹ And it's helpful to start there today because Paul's writing here in the second half of

¹ Kyle Rodriguez, Sermon: "Gospel Salvation"

Ephesians 2 is *connected* to that first half. If we stopped reading Ephesians at 2:10, the question hanging in the air would be, “what good works has he prepared for us to do?” But Paul is eager to answer that question!

So we get to Ephesians 2:11 and it starts out with the word “Therefore,” which means whatever Paul is about to say, it’s built upon what he’s already said. He’s painting a picture of the implications. He’s calling Christians to be a certain kind of people. He’s saying disciples of Jesus are given a new identity that has to control the kind of people they are in the world. **In other words, because of the cross, we should live as a people of reconciliation in a world of hostility.**

II. Strangers & Aliens (11-12)

So let’s look at the rest of verse 11: “¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—”

Ok it would be easy to get derailed with that sentence, so let’s pause there for a second and clarify. Paul is a Jewish man. Jesus is a Jewish man. Christianity began among the Jewish people. According to the Jews there were two kinds of people in the world: Jew & Gentile; and Jewish males bore a sign of God’s setting apart the Jewish people on their bodies - it was the sign of circumcision. But by this time, God had revealed that salvation through Christ wasn’t just for the Jews, it’s for all peoples. So Paul had begun his missionary journeys, preaching the gospel and planting churches among the Gentiles and the church in Ephesus was one of those new Gentile churches. So he’s calling this church to remember what it meant that they were Gentiles before the gospel came to them. He writes in verse 12: ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Maybe the best way to get our heads around this is to begin at the beginning. When God created Adam and Eve, he placed them in the Garden of Eden. And in that Garden, humanity had perfect fellowship with God. And because creation had perfect relationship with its Creator, there was also perfect harmony between all created things. But when Adam and Eve sinned against God, their sin didn’t just break these two human beings’ relationship with God. It plunged all of creation into darkness. Every part of creation was thrown into disharmony with God. Every man and woman now inherits a sinful nature from birth, and our sinful nature puts us at odds with God as his enemies. The whole universe has been thrown into enmity, and hostility because of sin. We not only sin against God, we sin against one another. But God has graciously, mercifully promised to bring peace (Gen 3:15). God is committed to glorifying himself by restoring and reconciling creation. Since the fall, God’s promise has been to reconcile all things through a son, a descendant of Eve. And so as the story of the bible unfolds we see God setting apart a line of descendants, a family, a whole ethnic group (Israel) of people set apart as recipients of his promises and the ones from whom this great Rescuer will come.

So Paul is reminding the Ephesians that God has ordained for his salvation to come through the Jewish people. The Jews had the advantage, the place of privilege near to the promises of God, the Gentiles did not. The Gentiles were far from the promises of God. They were strangers to God's promises. They needed to be reconciled to God and they were hopeless to do that without Christ. This is where we all find ourselves without Christ. Aching for peace, hopeless to find it on our own.

III. But Now In Christ Jesus (13-18)

Verse 13 takes a turn for the best: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Friends, that sums up the testimony of every follower of Jesus! I once was far off, but I have been brought near by the blood of Christ! The blood of Jesus shed on the cross accomplishes spiritual things. What does it mean for us to have been brought near by the blood?

One of the things it means is that the blood of Christ atoned for our sin. Remember our sin is what puts us at odds with God, our sin is the source of disharmony in the universe. Even though God's promise is to rescue us and reconcile us, God is a just God. It would be against his character to simply overlook sin. Sin has to be dealt with. It would be unjust for sin to go unpunished and we don't want an unjust God. In order for us to be brought near, the penalty for sin had to be administered. This line in verse 15 that Jesus' blood brought us near by abolishing the law has to do with atonement.

In the Old Testament, God gave the Jewish people the law. It made God's moral standards clear to his people. This is one of the ways that the Jews had a place of privilege, because they were without excuse. God's standards were clear to them and the ways they fell short of God's standards were unavoidably apparent. And when the people broke the law and disobeyed God's commands, he also gave them a ceremonial law that was for cleansing from sin, so that the people might be pure before God. And the focal point of the ceremonial law was the sacrifice that the Jews brought to the temple to worship God. The blood of a spotless lamb would be shed to cover the sins of the people. But the blood of an animal was never enough. Year after year, family after family after family would have to spill the blood of more and more animals on the altar in order to pay for their sin... then Jesus, the perfect Son of God came! When John the Baptist saw him he said, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). Every lamb who's blood had been shed was just an arrow pointing to the sacrifice that truly takes away sin! Jesus, in shedding his blood on the cross bore the penalty for sin. He was the substitute for us, taking the punishment that we deserve, standing in our place. This is how Paul can say in verse 14, "[Jesus] himself is our peace..." Jesus is our peace because he fulfills the requirements of the law. The law of God with all its demands was satisfied in Jesus' atonement for our sin. He made peace by providing the ultimate payment.

So the blood of Jesus brings us near because his blood atones for our sins. And the blood of Jesus brings us near because in the cross, Jesus is laying the foundation for God to build one new people in place of Jew and Gentile. I want to look again at verse 14-15. "14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the

law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,” in Jerusalem at the time when Paul was writing there would have been a four and half foot wall surrounding the Jewish Temple and signs on the wall that read, “No foreigner is to enter within... whoever is caught shall have himself to blame for his consequent death.”² There was a literal dividing wall of hostility separating the Gentiles from the promises of God, and there were also all these ceremonial laws that the Jews kept about food, cleanliness, sabbath restrictions, the ceremony of circumcision... So let’s break this down. There is sin that brings hostility between all people. There’s the law that divided Jews from Gentiles. And then there is the reality that salvation comes from the Jews, which if not understood properly could create a kind of caste system in the church between believing Jews and believing gentiles, which was a problem in the early church. And Paul is saying, in the cross all these things that divided Jew and Gentile have been torn down. He has preached peace to the Gentiles who were far off from God’s promises and the Jews who were near to God’s promises. And for both of them, Jesus has made a way for peace with God and reconciliation with each other. It’s verse 18, “through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

And friends, the peace the blood of Jesus has purchased is more than a ceasefire. Imagine if Russia and Ukraine announced an end to the war today. What kind of peace would that really be? Would Russians and Ukrainians still be divided? Would Putin and Zelensky become friends? No. That kind of fragile peace is cheap, and shaky, and uncertain. It doesn’t take away the hostility, it just bottles it up. But that isn’t the kind of peace that Jesus has purchased! Jesus is creating in himself one new man in place of the two... If we were sticking with the Russia/Ukraine analogy it would be as if Putin and Zelensky and their governments and militaries were removed and the borders were redrawn into one new country. This is what Jesus is doing. Not just preaching a ceasefire between Jew and Gentile, but making a new and better people.

IV. Our New Identity: A People of Reconciliation (19)

And it’s our new identity that Paul wants us to live out of! He has taken time in all these verse, retracing the way God has reconciled us to be able to say to the church, in effect, “God has reconciled you. Now you must be a people of reconciliation.” Through the cross, Christians are new people for God, united by the gospel. And since the cross has reconciled us to God, and we are called to love as we have been loved. This new identity in Christ has to control how we live.

That’s where Paul arrives starting in verse 19, “¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

So I want to try drawing some clear lines from the truth that Paul is communicating about who we are in Christ and the implications of that truth for how we think about our lives right now. What does that

² Merkle

look like to be a people of reconciliation? I think it means we have to be a people who reject the divisions that our hostile world imposes on us. We love to build fences don't we? For Paul and the Ephesian church the big fence that was being built in the church was between Jew and Gentile and the clear implication of the gospel was that there was to be no class system within the church. Jews were not to separate themselves from Gentiles. Gentiles were not required to become Jews in order to be truly faithful Christians.

Today the impulse to conform Christianity to the pressures of a world that loves hostility, the pressure to be a people of hostility instead of a people of reconciliation is still strong. There are so many ways that we need to put this into practice, but there are two that I want to highlight today. In order to live as people of reconciliation today, we must reject ethnic hostility and we must reject political hostility.

First - we have to reject ethnic hostility. Put simply, our passage today confronts racism head on. There is no room in God's church for an attitude that says, "let them stay over there" or "those people aren't my kind of people." We need to be a church that welcomes and every ethnicity, every skin color. We need to be a people who work hard to build bridges by listening well, befriending those who are different than us, practicing empathy for the tragedies that strike communities that are different than our ethnic background. Livingston County is 98% white and that is not a sinful thing, but our context does make us susceptible to being thoughtless and uncompassionate toward other ethnic groups. And we also have to own our history. Our area has a reputation for having strong racist groups in the past. So it is worth saying and saying strongly that in order to be a faithful gospel people here in Livingston County, we must be a people who reject racism and love diversity because we come from one new people that God has made in Christ from every nation, every tribe, every language!

Second - we have to reject political hostility. If the divide between Jew and Gentile was the major issue plaguing the church in the time of Paul's writing, I believe the tribal political division we are experiencing in our day today is one of the major issues sucking life out of God's church today. In Paul's day there were parts of the church that would have looked at a gentile believer and said, if you're not circumcised we cannot worship with and in our day today, tribal lines are being drawn within the church over political agendas. But did you catch what Paul calls Christians in verse 19? "...no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints." that means that we need to our national/political identity within the context of our identity as citizens in the kingdom of God. That means that as American Christians be grateful to God for the freedoms we have, we should submit to our governing authorities, we should pray for our leaders, we should take advantage of the blessings of living in a nation that allows citizens to engage in government. We can have a patriotic love for our nation, but all of that should be a distant second to our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. And that means, friends, that we American Christians have a thicker ties to Christians from China and Iran and North Korea than we ever will have with an unbelieving American citizen. It means that the Christian who rejects the candidate that you champion has a eternal spiritual claim on your welcome and your affection and your loyalty. It means that people who interact with you in person or online should see your love for Jesus gushing out way more than your policy preferences.

Because you are citizens in a kingdom that cannot be shaken! You have no need to freak out. You can hold to your convictions and be ruled by your identity as a citizen in the kingdom of reconciliation.

IV. A Temple of Reconciliation (21-22)

Friends the world that we live in conditions us to live as people of hostility, but the gospel calls us to embrace a better way of living. You might know the famous verse from 1 John 4, "We love because he first loved us." And here in Ephesians 2, the formula of the message is really quite similar: we reconcile because he first reconciled us.

Jesus Christ came to live among his enemies, and atoned for the sin of those who had rebelled against his kingship so that you and I might be transformed from rebels and traitors to citizens of his kingdom and members of his household. We have been saved by a humble, merciful, patient, welcoming, loving Savior and his reconciliation has forged a new people out of us.

Ephesians 2 ends really beautifully. Let me read from verse 19 to the end of the chapter.

⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

In Jesus this one new people that God has made by the blood of Christ is also being built into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit. That is amazing! And let me just pull on one thread through the bible to tell you why:

You remember that when God created Adam and Eve, he put them in the garden of Eden. And in the Garden, God dwelt with them and gave them a mission go from the garden to fill the earth. Then, like we've already said, Adam and Eve's sin separated God from creation and fractured the cosmos. But God in his mercy promised to reconcile and as he set aside the people of Israel, he gave a sign that God and man would one day dwell together again and it was the temple. The temple was the place where God's presence would once again dwell among his people. When Christ was on earth, he told the people that the temple would be torn down and raised in three days. And of course he was referring to himself. Jesus was truly the presence God in the midst of humanity. And now, in the church, Paul is saying that God in building his church, is building a new temple. That the church is now the manifestation of God's presence in the world. And the end of the story is that the dwelling place of God will once again be with his people and he shall be our God and we shall be his people with him for eternity.

And until that day, we - his one new reconciled people - take his presence to all of creation, as ministers of the gospel of reconciliation until the day when our faith shall be made sight.