

“CAN’T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?”
(Ephesians 2:11-18)

In 1991 four police officers were acquitted of charges of excessive force against a black man named Rodney King, and the verdict sparked a series of riots in Los Angeles that lasted six days and led to 63 deaths, 7000 fires, and over a billion dollars in damage. In the midst of the riots Rodney King made a television appearance pleading for the riots to end, and opened his remarks by saying, “I just want to say – you know – can we, can we all just get along? Can’t we all just get along?”

Human history has shown that we don’t get along all that well. Historians estimate that there have been over 15,000 wars and almost 4 billion people have been killed. There have been 7,500 “eternal covenants” agreed upon by various nations with the hope of bringing peace, but none have lasted.

Despite the fact that the internet has created a global community, we are as divided as we ever have been. Like many of you, I grew up in a community where everyone got along well, and the only division I remember is native Oregonians not liking Californians moving into the area. Tom McCall, the governor at the time, was famous for saying, “Feel free to visit Oregon, just don’t plan on staying.”

Today we’re divided in just about every way imaginable – red states and blue states, black and white, upper class and middle class, conservative and liberal – and much of this division has taken place in just the past few years. Closer to home, many families are divided over conflicts and disputes, and even churches – places that should be a haven of peace and harmony – have divided over various conflicts the past couple of years.

Given all of our division, is peace even possible? How can two diametrically opposed people come together as one? As we come to our passage today in Ephesians, we see two groups of people with a long and bitter hostility not only come together in peace, but form such a close bond that they become a whole new people.

In chapter one of Ephesians through verse 10 of chapter two, the Apostle Paul has described how God takes sinners – separated and alienated from Him – redeems them by the blood of Christ and adopts them into His family. It’s the greatest rags to riches story ever told – we go from death to life, and from eternal judgment to eternal life. Now, beginning in 2:11 through the end of chapter 3, Paul switches gears and describes how Christ not only reconciles individuals to God *vertically*, but how He reconciles groups of people *horizontally*.

Verses 11-18 can be divided into two main sections. Verses 11-12 describes the division that existed before Christ, and verses 13-18 describes the reconciliation with others that comes through Christ. Verses 19-22, which we will look at next time, describes the amazing results that flow from our reconciliation with others.

Let’s dive in and look first at **the division that existed prior to Christ**. Paul writes in 11-12, “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”

Most of the people in the church at Ephesus were Gentiles. “Gentile” is a word we don’t use anymore, but in the centuries leading up to Christ and in the early church, the word Gentile was a way of referring to any nation or person outside the Jewish race. A Gentile was a non-Jew.

The separation between Jew and Gentile began in Genesis 12 when God called Abraham and set him and his descendants apart from the other nations. God’s intention from the beginning was to use the Jewish people to be a blessing to other people groups and by being different, draw them to God and the future Messiah. But rather than be a missionary to the Gentiles, the Jews began to look down on anyone not like them and refuse to have anything to do with them. They believed that God only loved Jewish people, and the Gentiles were pagans to be shunned.

The only reason God created Gentiles, Jews said, was to fuel the fires of hell. They believed Abraham would stand at the gates of heaven and turn away all Gentiles. If a Gentile woman was giving birth to a baby, you couldn’t assist her because you would help bringing a pagan Gentile into the world. If a Jew and Gentile ever got married, a funeral service would be held that same day for the Jewish boy or girl who did so, symbolizing that they were now dead to their family. If you were a Jew you couldn’t go into a Gentile home, and if you happened to pass through Gentile territory, you would shake the dust off your sandals once you reentered Jewish territory.

All this gives you an idea of how hostile things were between Jew and Gentile. To show their contempt for Gentiles, Jews derogatorily referred to them as the “uncircumcised.” Remember when David was going out to kill Goliath? He said, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” The Jews took pride in their circumcision as a sign of their covenant with God.

In verse 12 Paul reminds Gentile believers of what they were before Christ, and points out five disadvantages they had as compared to the Jews. First, they were **without Christ**. Gentiles had no hope or expectation of a Messiah to deliver them – Jesus, the Messiah would come through the Jews. They had no framework or knowledge that such a Savior was coming.

Second, the Gentiles were **without citizenship**. They had no place or home with God’s people, and were treated like foreigners and aliens. This is seen in the story recorded in Mark 7 where Jesus is ministering in the northern Gentile region of Tyre, and a Gentile woman came to Him begging Him to help her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus said, “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Kind of a shocking thing to say, but Gentiles were considered dogs to the Jews, and Jesus is testing her faith to see how she will respond. The woman said, “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, “I know I’m not a Jew, but I believe in you.” And with that reply of faith, Jesus healed her daughter.

Third, the Gentiles were **without the covenant promises**. God made promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – promising a land to live in, many descendants, and the blessing of bringing the future Messiah into the world. God would later make a covenant with David, promising that the Messiah would come through the line of David and would establish a kingdom that would endure forever. None of these covenants were made with the Gentiles.

Fourth, the Gentiles were **without hope**. Where Israel put their hope in a future Messiah, the Gentile world could only hope for what little joy they could find in the present life. As I shared a few weeks ago, a recent poll revealed that people today are as hopeless about the future as they've been in 50 years. Without Christ there is no hope for a future, no hope for life after death, and no hope for salvation. This world is all there is.

Fifth, the Gentiles were **without God**. The pagan world was full of gods, but they didn't know the true and living God. In Acts 17, when Paul preached on Mar's Hill in Athens, he complimented the Greeks for being religious, and said, "When I was looking around at your objects of worship, I found an altar dedicated to the 'unknown god,' well, let me tell you about Him." Today we have an entire generation that knows nothing about God, the Bible, or how they can be saved. Romans 10:14 says, "How will people without hope and without God hear about Him unless someone tells them?" We who have been privileged to hear and receive the gospel have an obligation to proclaim the good news with those who haven't heard.

After describing a bleak picture what Gentiles were before Christ, in verses 13-18 Paul describes the dramatic change that takes place through Christ, and how they have not only been reconciled with God, but **reconciled with other people** – the very people that once treated them like dogs and outcasts. Verse 13 begins with the familiar words, "But now..." We saw these words back in verse 4 where Paul said we were spiritually dead and doomed to spend eternity in hell, *but now* we have been made alive in Christ.

Now in verse 13 he says, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." All of the disadvantages the Gentiles had before Christ – living a pagan life with no awareness or need of God, not being part of God's covenant promises with Israel, and having no hope of a Savior – all of this is erased with Christ and they who were once far off and now been brought near by the blood of Christ.

In Ephesians 1:7 Paul said that "we have redemption through the blood of Christ." Sin is such an offence to a holy God that it demands the penalty of death. Jesus paid the penalty we deserve by shedding His blood on the cross. The blood represents life – Jesus gave His life in place of our life in order to forgive our sins and reconcile us with God.

Christ's blood not only reconciles us with God, but with other people. Verse 14 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." The world is desperately looking for peace – peace with God, peace with others, and peace within themselves – and yet all our attempts at finding peace fail at some point because it cannot be humanly manufactured. Only Jesus, the Prince of Peace, can bring us peace. As Paul says, He himself is our peace.

Christ not only brings us peace with God vertically, but peace with others horizontally. Verse 14 says that He has made the two groups – Jews and Gentiles – one. Reading this 2000 years later we can't appreciate the level of tension that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. How do you go to church with someone who once thought you were a dog, a pagan who existed only to fuel the fires of hell?

It might be similar to a slave after the Civil War attending church with his or her former slaveowner, or two former political rivals finding common ground.

Verse 14 says that Christ has “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” The wall here speaks metaphorically of a wall of separation between people. When you’re having a conflict with someone, you say, “Our relationship has hit a wall – there’s a barrier between us that keeps us from talking.”

This metaphorical wall between Jews and Gentiles was illustrated by a literal wall that existed in the Jewish temple. The temple was designed with several barriers allowing different levels of access. The innermost room of the temple was the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest was allowed to enter and only one day a year on the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies was covered with a thick curtain to keep everyone else out. On the other side of the curtain was a room called the “Holy Place” which only the priests were allowed to enter to perform their daily duties.

Just outside the temple building, surrounding it, was the Court of Israel, which only Jewish males were allowed to enter. Jewish women were limited to the Court of Women, going further out from the temple building. Around the temple building and the Court of Israel and the Court of Women stood a large wall, and beyond this wall was the Court of Gentiles, where non-Jews could come who wanted to visit the temple. The Court of Gentiles was where Jesus drove out the moneychangers, and Jesus where observed the widow offer her two small coins to the Lord.

The wall told the Gentiles that they were not allowed to go beyond that point. Archaeologists have discovered a stone inscription from the time of Jesus that reads, “No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

But now that wall, both literally and metaphorically, has been torn down by Christ. There is no longer any barrier between Jew or Gentile. What’s more, at the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross, Matthew says that the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom, opening the way for every person – Jew or Gentile – to come directly into the presence of God. In verse 18 Paul says, “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” This was a revolutionary message to Jews and Gentiles in the first century. And the same is true today – access to God is made available to every person, every nation, every race, every gender – we all come to God the Father through the blood of Jesus by one Spirit.

Paul goes on in verses 15-17 to describe four ways Christ tore down the barrier between Jew and Gentile. First, **He abolished the law**... Verse 15, “By setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.” In the Old Testament God gave Israel a set of laws to live by and set them apart from the other nations. These laws included *moral* laws – such as the Ten Commandments, *civil* laws pertaining to the governing of Israel, and *ceremonial* laws such as Sabbath restrictions, what to eat or not eat, and so forth.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said that He didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it in Himself. Since we as sinful humans were unable to live up to the law and thereby condemned by the law, God sent His Son to fulfill the law for us, so that we are no longer under the law. In the New Testament we are still expected to live by God’s moral and ethical law, but we do so through the power of Christ living within us.

When Paul says that Christ set aside the law in His flesh (meaning His death), he’s talking specifically about the ceremonial laws that separated Jews and Gentiles – such as circumcision, or what day you should worship, or what you were supposed to eat.

In Colossians Paul says that these ceremonial laws were a shadow of things to come, which was Christ, who fulfilled all of the law in Himself so that we are set free from the law. A major controversy in the early church revolved around whether Gentile Christians should be required to obey the Jewish ceremonial laws, and the answer handed down by the apostles was “No, we’ve been set free from the law, particularly the ceremonial laws, and we’ve been brought together as one by Christ.”

Christ not only abolished the law, but secondly, **He created a new humanity**. 15b says, “His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.” The phrase “new humanity” is talking about the church. Not only do we as individuals become brand-new persons in Christ, but we also become part of a new humanity made up of other people.

A second-century church leader named Clement referred to Christians as the “third race.” God didn’t turn the Gentiles into Jews or make the Jews a little more like the Gentiles – He made a whole new group of people. As someone said, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” When we come to the cross God does not see us as Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, educated or uneducated – He sees us as sinners brought near by the blood of Christ.

A bishop in Australia named John Reed tells about driving a school bus with native aboriginal kids and white Australian kids. When the kids started fighting and bickering, the bishop stopped the bus and said, “From now on you’re not black or white, you’re all green.” He created a new humanity on the spot and said, “Anyone who rides on my bus is green.” His words seemed to work until several miles down the road someone at the back of the bus said, “All right, all dark green get on the right side, and all the light green get on the left side.”

The bishop had the right idea, but he couldn’t make a new race – only Christ can change the hearts of people and bring them together. It makes me think of Corrie Ten-Boom, who survived the holocaust as a child. Years later while going to church she came face to face with a former Nazi prison guard she recognized, who had given her life to Christ. Corrie Ten-Boom said when she saw him, she froze and all the hostility she felt towards him rose to the surface, but then – in an almost out-of-body experience she raised her hand to shake the hand of her former enemy. She said, “Only the fact that I had been forgiven and reconciled with God was I able to forgive and be reconciled with this man.” Christ came to make a new humanity, bringing all those who claim the name of Christ – even former enemies – together as one.

Christ abolished the law, created a new humanity, and third, **He reconciled the new humanity to Christ**. Verse 16 says, “And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” The cross is the great reconciler. When we gather for church each Sunday we have any number of potential barriers – we have different ages, we’re at different stages of life, we have different background and points of view, we have different personalities and temperaments – and the only thing that holds us together is our unity in Christ. Only our like-minded faith in Christ can bring us together as one.

True peace only comes through the cross. People can hold up peace signs and have peace rallies, but you can’t have peace when you’re still at war. The Bible says we are at enmity with God, and until we find peace with God there can be no true peace with others. Jeremiah condemned false prophets of his day who said, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace.” Peace without reconciliation with God is just a slogan to make us feel better. Christ came to reconcile sinners to God and others through the cross, and to put to death the hostility that exists between them.

Fourth, verse 17 says, **He brought peace**... “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” When Jesus came to earth, He preached that people could find peace with God through Him, and after He ascended back to heaven He commissioned and empowered His disciples to preach the gospel of peace through the world. He brought peace both to those who are far away – the Gentiles – and those who were near – the Jews. Both groups needed salvation.

True peace will only come through the gospel, and without the gospel the world would be a very dark and hopeless place. The reason America is getting darker by the day is because the gospel is either not being proclaimed or is being silenced by those who oppose the gospel. It’s hard to believe that a message of peace would be met with such hostility, but we must remember that the world is under control of the evil one. Rather than fear the evil one, we are to go out courageously, in the name of Jesus with the message of peace that the world so desperately needs to hear.

Our passage this morning leaves us with two questions: One, are you at peace with God? Have you put your trust in Him and received His free gift of salvation in Christ?

The second question is: Are you at peace with others? Are you practicing peace in your marriage, in your family, in the community, in the church? Are you preaching the gospel of peace, so that hopeless people will find peace with God and with one another? If ever we needed the peace of Christ, it is now.

A lasting symbol of our peace with God and with others is the Lord’s Table, where we remember that peace with God was made possible through the blood of Christ, and we partake of one bread and one cup representing our unity in Christ. The Lord invites anyone who has been reconciled to God through trusting Christ to partake of the bread and the cup. But He also wants you to come to the table with peace in your heart towards others. As Romans 12 says, “As far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people.” If there is bitterness or grievance with another brother or sister, seek reconciliation with them just as you have been reconciled to God through Christ.