

God's Family Established

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me welcome you, those of you who are coming back, those of you who are joining us for the first time. My name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here, and so I hope to meet you if we haven't already.

One of the things that we've been doing over the past few weeks during this time of our service is reflecting on the nature of the church and what it means to be the church. And for those of us who are part of this community, we're reflecting on this because we want to be in this neighborhood what we feel the church is called to be, which is a family.

We want to be the kind of family that we heard about in the psalm that we read together, a family into which God places the lonely and the solitary. We want to be the kind of family that is an open family that's able to welcome and to receive and to embrace and to love all who come.

So we've been talking about that, looking at different places in God's word where we can learn more about what that looks like. And of all these things that we have learned about what we're called to be, one of the things that we've learned is that as a community, we're called to be unified. A unified family, unified around this hope. And that requires special attention because, and you've probably figured this out, most of you are old enough to have realized, that division seems to be the thing that comes most naturally to us.

[1 : 25] Right? I even try to explain what denomination we're a part of and after a while and enough acronyms, I see people's kind of, you know, eyes just sort of fade out, you know. And so division is the thing that comes most naturally.

Unity, you know, a unified community is supernatural. It's not something that we can manufacture just by strategy or willpower.

A unified community is supernatural. And one of the things that you see with the gospel, which is the good news at the heart of the Christian faith is, the gospel isn't just about repairing our relationship with God.

It has a lot to do with restoring our relationships with one another. And so it's what you might call the cruciform nature of the gospel. It deals with both this relationship and these relationships. And one of the things that makes Christian community unique, the church unique, is that our relationships with one another are directly shaped by our relationship with God.

[2 : 32] And so that's the theme that we're going to explore tonight. And we're going to do that by looking at Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 19 through 22. This is a letter, the letter that we call Ephesians is a letter that Paul wrote to the churches in Asia Minor.

It was most likely a letter that was meant to be circulated. But it was dealing with an issue that was happening in these churches. It was a very serious issue. It was an issue of division. And these churches, some of them were on the verge of splitting.

And so Paul is attempting to speak into that. And so what we'll see as we look at this passage is a potential cause for division, something that is every bit as much a threat to us. And then we'll see how the gospel overcomes this cause for division, how the gospel overpowers it.

So let's pray for the Lord to lead us. Father, we do ask, as you promised to do, we ask that you would speak to us. Lord, we truly say, heaven help us if we have only the words of mere human beings to rely on.

Lord, we need you. I need to hear from you tonight. We all do. And we ask that through these spoken words that you would open your living word to us and that your living word would reveal, or your written word would reveal to us your living word.

[3 : 51] That we would encounter Jesus face to face. That we would be changed because of that. And we pray this in your son's name. Amen. First of all, a potential cause for division.

I say that because in the very first verse of our passage, you see a reference to division. What does Paul say? He says, so then, he says to his readers, you are no longer strangers and aliens. Now those words right there connote division. Right? You don't call somebody a stranger or an alien unless there's some kind of barrier between you. So we've got to figure out what Paul's talking about.

The Ephesian church was made up, like a number of churches in the first generation church, was made up largely of Gentile converts.

So these are people who had never been Jewish. They had never been circumcised. They had never lived under the law of Moses. But they had heard about Jesus. They wanted to be baptized. They wanted to become Christians.

[4 : 54] And so they had sort of gone straight past Judaism into Christianity. And a lot of the Jews were very shaken up by this. And the big question was, do you need to become Jewish before you can become Christian?

Now you may not understand all of the nuances of that kind of thing. But one of the things that we need to understand is, for the average Jew, Gentiles were unclean. You didn't associate with them. You certainly didn't eat with them. And so you have Peter, the Apostle Peter, who wrote a couple of books in the New Testament, at one point refused to eat his food at the same table with Gentiles. Gentile Christians. So you had all these Gentiles going to church and feeling very much on the outside and wondering what had happened. And feeling as though even though God had reconciled them, or so they had been told, to himself, they were still treated like strangers and aliens.

Now some of this cultural stuff, again, may not translate directly to us today. Some of it does. But I do believe that underneath the kind of culture and the theology is a reality or a dynamic that we will all immediately understand.

[6 : 12] It's something that is rooted in sin. So it's not culturally bound. It's something that exists today as much as it did in this day. And what you begin to see is, this is somewhat about theology, but a lot of it is about sociology.

And all too often, we see theology used to justify that which is, in reality, sociology.

And I think that that's some of what's going on here. I think that's some of what motivated perhaps even Peter. It's hard to pinpoint. But there's an underlying dynamic that exists in all societies.

In society, there are visible systems, visible hierarchies. Hierarchies. So you go to work and hopefully you kind of know the rank. You know who the vice president is and you know who the CEO is and you know what the board does.

Hopefully you know kind of where you are. In the military, they have a very laid out system and you can get a little red book and open it and read and know what a colonel is and what a major is and what a general is.

[7 : 16] And you can know how they all stack up. And it stays relatively stable across time. But there's another parallel system, a parallel dynamic that is much harder.

You'll never find a book that lays it out because the rules are constantly in flux. It's very hard to pinpoint. But it's what C.S. Lewis calls the inner ring. The inner ring.

And it's defined not so much in terms of a hierarchy but in terms of just two categories. Insiders and outsiders. And this is that which determines where that line falls and who sits on which side.

And it exists at every level of society. There are clear dividing lines, ones that we're all more or less aware of, like race, like class, like socioeconomic status, like education level, like gender.

And all of the kind of privilege and access that goes along with those categories. So those are the ones that we read a lot about and hear a lot about that cause an enormous amount of hurt and injustice in the world.

[8 : 29] But there are also other ways of thinking about this. There are stages of life. You know, we experience this a lot in our church. You know, you sort of have married people talking about marriage and making references that convey the attitude that, oh, if you're single, you just wouldn't understand.

Or there are single people talking about the challenges and uniqueness of being single. And it's just something that if you're married, you can't speak into. You just couldn't possibly understand. There are people that talk about having kids and they have this sort of knowing eye role with the other people who have kids.

And they say, oh, well, just appreciate your freedom. You just don't know what it's like to have kids. Or you have the people that are maybe divorced. And they look around and they say, well, man, is there anybody that I can identify with in this church?

Right? There are people who, because of their life stage, there's a grouping and there's an immediate sense that unless you're a part of that life stage, you just don't get it.

Right? Most of us encounter the sense of the inner ring through very subtle experiences that show us that there's some circle of relationships and that we're not a part of it.

[9 : 48] At least not in the same way. So this could be something as simple as sitting in a room full of people and there's a knowing look that is passed between two people. You know, somebody just kind of goes, hmm, to somebody else.

And you say, what are you talking about? Or an inside joke. You know, somebody says a random word like Stanley and the other person busts out laughing.

And you're like, well, what are you talking about? And you don't get it. You're not in on it. And they have a connection that you don't. Why? It could be things that are a little more obvious.

You know, maybe somebody texts you and they say, hey, are you going to be there tonight? And you have no idea what's happening that night. I mean, so I was thinking this morning, you know, how do you handle that situation?

You know, do you say, remind me where it is again? Or do you, what do you say? You know? Or somebody, you know, you see pictures on Facebook. And you see some of your really good friends.

[10 : 54] And they're doing something all together last weekend. And they look like they're having fun. And you had no idea they were going to do that. You were just sitting at home. And you wonder, well, why didn't they invite me?

What was it about me? Did they purposely do this without me? You know, I was thinking about the experience of walking into a church. If any of you were here for the first time, no matter what we do as a church to try to create a welcoming space, walking into a church for the first time is terrifying. Because you feel like you're the only one that doesn't know what's going on. And everybody else knows each other. It's not true. Even when, you know, even when you're in a small community where it feels like that.

Where you assume everybody knows everybody. It's not true. But it sure feels that way. Maybe if you're a part of a church. And we do small groups here in our church. And maybe, you know, you have that experience at the end of a small group where you have, you know, the official kind of thing ends.

And people are going to go their separate ways. And two or three people group up. And they get ready to, and they're going to go out for drinks. And then there's that whole awkward thing where you're like, well, they're going out. And it's not really an official small group thing.

[12 : 05] And they're going out, but they're not really inviting me. But can I just go? Or would I be imposing? But we were just all sharing our hearts and praying for each other. And yet, I just don't feel like I can, I'm welcome.

But why wouldn't they want me to come? And then you're like, well, I guess I won't come. But then it just needles away at your brain. And you're just thinking, well, do they, what, is this like a, it's the inner ring.

It's the inner ring. These are all examples of the inner ring. And what Lewis says is that our social world is like an onion. It's rings within rings within rings within rings within rings.

So every church, every office, every school, every friend group, every workplace, everything, each social arena has its own rings within rings within rings. And there's this sense, and this is what the inner ring is all about, there's this sense that there are those who are in the know.

I've had so many people tell me, well, I just feel like at Advent, there are those people who are just kind of in the know. They kind of know what's going on, and there are other people who are not. I've had people tell me, I've been coming for months, and I just, I don't feel like I can kind of break into that kind of inner ring.

[13 : 10] And sometimes I say, well, I kind of feel like I haven't broken into the inner ring yet either. But there's a sense that there are those people who are in and those people who are out. That's the inner ring.

And here's the point. Our first instinct when we say this, you know, my first instinct in literally saying this is to say, we've got to do away with all these rings, people.

We've got to do away with them. But then you begin to think, and you realize, well, actually, these rings are kind of unavoidable, and to some extent, rings are necessary and can even be good. You know, leadership teams are necessary.

If you didn't have leadership teams, no decisions would ever get made, right? Working groups and committees are necessary. Those are rings. Your group of friends is inherently to some extent exclusive, and that's good.

Friendship is inherently exclusive. It's just a part of friendship. Right? Aristotle talked about that. There are some, your family is a good example of an inner ring that's good.

[14:14] So rings exist, and they're not necessarily inherently evil. In fact, they can be quite good. So the direction we go is not to say rings are evil.

If we look at the direction that Paul is going, and I believe this is really what he's addressing in places like Ephesus. Rings themselves are not evil.

It is our desire to be on the inside. That is what does the damage. Our desire to be insiders. Lewis calls it being an inner ringer.

And it's the desire that causes the problem. Because listen, if you're on the outside of what you perceive to be an inner ring, then that's going to bring up all kinds of insecurity in you, and you're going to wonder about it, and you're going to wonder, why didn't those people invite me?

Why didn't I get asked to be a part of that thing? What was that look that they were passing? You know, why does my boss, whenever my boss is talking to my co-worker, they always seem to laugh and be jovial, but then whenever I talk to my boss, it feels formal and awkward.

[15:18] What is that? What do they have that I'm not a part of? And those kinds of things will eat away at you. And what you'll do is, the more it eats away at you, the more you will be willing to do whatever it takes to get on the inside.

I'll tell you a story about myself. I first came aware of the inner ring dynamic when I was in fourth grade. Maybe everybody else had figured it out by then. I don't know. But I remember, maybe I was on the outside of that.

But I remember, I remember in fourth grade, there was a cool kid, and he was kind of the ringleader, so to speak. And then he had his kind of like, you know, sort of circle of cronies.

And I was not even, I was not a cool kid, so I was not even a part of that outer circle. So I wasn't even in the orbit. I was in like a neighboring solar system. And so I just wanted to be in the orbit of the cool kid.

And so there was this one day when they were all kind of laughing, and I could tell they were up to something, and one of them turns to me and says, hey, Tommy, come on. And I thought, this is my chance. You know, the door, this titanium wall, there's been a crack and the door is opened, you know?

[16:23] And it's like, and the door, and I went running through it. And I was like, yes, I'm on the inside. And then we're going out of the classroom. Okay, where are we going, you know? And then we go down the hall. Where are we going? And then we go into the guy's bathroom.

And I'm thinking, oh, this is kind of weird, but okay. This is what they do. And then we go in there, and then there's this other kid who's in there. And he's not in the ring. He's in a totally different ring. And then they, all of a sudden, we're grabbing him. And they're all laughing, but he's not laughing. And we pull him into this stall.

And a couple of the guys kind of grab him, and they stick his head down in the toilet, and they flush it. And they laugh, and they say, we just gave him a swirly. And it happened just like that.

And I would like to say that I made a heroic stand and got between him and them and fought him off with my bare hands, but I was on the inside.

[17:25] It felt really good. And I remember in the aftermath thinking, what have I done? It may also be the first time I really remember feeling deep remorse.

And we got paddled. This is way back when you could still get paddled at school. And the paddle had holes in it for reducing air resistance.

And the vice principal did it. And it was the 80s, so I had a zipper on my back pocket. And so he, because the 80s. And I remember he took a moment to zip, which also felt inappropriate in a weird way, to move the zipper over to the far right so the paddle wouldn't cause any kind of welt.

And then bam, bam, bam, you know, gave me with my hands on his desk. The whole thing, you know, I guess that's illegal now. The whole school would get shut down. But it happened back then. And that wasn't the worst part. The worst part, other than having to face that kid again, was my fourth grade teacher, after everybody had left, asked me to stay.

[18 : 32] And she had this kind of stoic look on her face. And then after everybody was gone, she just broke down sobbing. And she said, Tommy, how could you? And she said, you're not that kind of person.

And then she said that whatever you thought you were doing, whatever you thought was worth it, it wasn't worth it. And she said, I'm so disappointed in you.

And it absolutely crushed me. And I remember being pierced at that moment with the realization of the power that I couldn't articulate at the time of the inner ring and how I would do anything at that moment if I let myself to be a part of it.

See, that's what happens, and that's what Lewis warns us against if that desire takes over. But here's the flip side of this. If you are, in fact, on the inside of whatever ring you are caring about at that moment, if you are an insider, and this desire has taken hold, then what's going to happen? Well, you're going to reinforce the boundaries. Right? And why are you going to do that? Simple economics. Supply and demand. Right? If you are on the inside, the harder it is to get in, the more valuable your membership.

[19 : 46] So you're going to do whatever you can to keep other people out. So either way, if that desire takes hold of us, which it will, if left unchecked, it's going to create destruction.

So C.S. Lewis says, unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life. Not only in your vocation, in your job, but in all spheres of life.

So the desire to be insiders, to be included in whatever local rings exist around us, that's the root of snobbery, of exclusivism, of lots of forms of division.

And unless we do something about it, it's going to dominate us. And so what Paul's wanting to do here is to show us how does the gospel overcome this desire in us? What hope do we have to stamp this out before we find ourselves shaking our heads and thinking, what have I done?

Paul's answer is this. He says, the more we understand what Jesus has accomplished for us, the more this desire will be reduced in us. The more we understand the meaning of the death of Jesus, the more we will experience the death of this desire.

[21 : 02] And so you can imagine Paul, this is the context of Ephesians 2, 19 to 22. You can imagine Paul taking the Ephesians by the shoulders and looking in their eyes and fixing them with his gaze and saying, you need to understand who you are.

You need to understand what Jesus has done for you and what that means about you. What has changed? So he says, he gives them these three images to help them understand these three metaphors.

He says, so then you're no longer strangers and aliens, you're fellow citizens. With the saints, you've been made citizens. And then he goes on, he says, and you're members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him, you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. So these three metaphors, citizens, family members, temple stones, interesting.

What's he saying here? Each is like a concentric circle of belonging. So he says, at the outermost level, you've become citizens.

[22 : 20] So there's no longer Jew and Gentile. There's no longer Roman citizen and non-citizen. See, that was a big deal. Paul is proud of his Roman citizenship. But he says, no, there's something even more important.

You're citizens of the same kingdom, which means before God, you have all of the same rights and privileges. Jew or Gentile, doesn't matter. You have all of the same benefits. You have the same assurance.

He says, in other words, you've come into the inner ring of citizenship. That's been done for you by Jesus. But he says, it doesn't stop there. It gets a lot more intimate.

Not only are you co-citizens, but you're members of the same family. They're your members of the same family in the sense that you now have the same father.

You're brothers and sisters. You know, there's that amazing place where the disciples come to Jesus and they say, hey, your mom and your brothers, they're here and they want to see you. And Jesus says, who are my mother and my brother and my sisters?

[23 : 21] And he gestures to all of his disciples. And he says, everyone who does the will of my father, those are my mother and my brother and my sisters. He's clearly saying, I have come to establish a new family.

You know, we talk about in Genesis, when God talks about marriage, Adam leaves his father and mother and holds fast to his wife. That's what's happening in Matthew 12, by the way.

Jesus is leaving his father and his earthly mother and he's cleaving to his wife. The church. The bride of Christ, right?

A new family. So this is why they call the Christians the third race. You're not Jewish, you're not Gentile, you're something new, right? You're natural born citizens, you're natural born family members.

But it doesn't stop there. Paul goes on. He says, in order to overcome your insecurity and your snobbery and your exclusivity and your division, it's all rooted in this desire we have for the inner ring.

[24 : 24] You have to understand that, in Jesus, you're citizens. More than that, you're family members. But there's one last piece, he says, it's even more intimate. You're stones in the same temple.

And I say, well, citizens check, family members check, stones, it just seems to be a departure. But it's not. It's not a mixed metaphor. This is the most intimate image that he could give us.

Because what is he saying? You are built together with all of your brothers and sisters into one united dwelling place for the God of the universe.

And this conveys the idea of what theologians call the interpenetration of God, where God is dwelling in us as a community and we are dwelling in God at the same time.

There is a mutual indwelling that is occurring. In other words, you have been made a part of that which is God's holy dwelling on earth, no longer a temple of stone and mortar, but rather a temple of human beings and human souls.

[25 : 33] He says, you're built together into this dwelling place. So what's he saying? He's saying, don't you see, don't you realize, Ephesians who were so caught up trying to get into this or that inner circle, don't you understand what's happened?

You've been given access to the ultimate inner ring. The ultimate inner ring. Jesus brought you into the inner ring of citizenship and then he brought you into the inner ring of family and now he's brought you into the ultimate inner ring of the Trinity.

The Trinity. When we talk about God, God is a Trinity of beings, Father, Son, and Spirit. The ultimate inner ring that has existed perfectly in love for all eternity. And what the Bible tells us is we were made to have a relationship within that ring.

to live our life alongside the members of the Trinity in God. But it tells us that because we would rather be gods than be with God, we were cast out.

The Bible uses this imagery of a cherubim and a flaming sword guarding the entrance to this place of fellowship. We were cast out of that ring. And what the Bible says is that we spend all of our lives trying to get back in.

[26 : 53] And so when I look at what I did to that kid and I try to understand it and when we try to understand the gnawing persistence of this desire in us, I believe what it really is is it is ultimately the good desire to be in that ultimate inner ring of the Trinity.

But I believe it's been twisted. And I believe that what we do instead is we subsist on what you might think of as false trinities. And that's what the inner ring really is.

It's a false trinity. It's an illusion. It promises but the minute you get inside you realize that it doesn't deliver and so many people spend their whole lives peeling that onion back one layer at a time and finally you get to the end of it and you realize there's nothing here.

So what is the gospel? What is the good news of the gospel? That Jesus Christ was the ultimate insider, a member of that innermost ring and yet because he looks at you and he looks at me and he sees that we are lonely and that we are strangers and that we are aliens and that we are cut off, he left that inner ring came here, became the ultimate outcast, not only cast out by us but at the end of the day on the cross the real pain of the cross wasn't the physical pain, it was that his father

turned his back on him and Jesus experienced that outer darkness of alienation in a way that we never have and God willing never will.

But he did it so that what? He could forgive our sin and invite us all the way in to the innermost ring of the Trinity to be what we were made to be.

[28 : 45] So as we consider this and we consider what it might look like for us to forego that empty promise of the false Trinity and embrace the true Trinity, I believe the more we hear this story and the more that this story becomes embedded in our hearts, the more we reflect on the fact that we are in fact in the innermost ultimate ring through Jesus, the more that will extinguish this desire in us and it will begin to change us.

The more that our relationships are defined by the story of the gospel, the less we will need that false promise of the inner ring in our social circles. So if you find yourself on the outside and the gospel has really taken root in your life, if you find yourself on the outside, it won't eat away with you, the insecurity won't gnaw away at you and if it does, you'll have a way of answering the insecurity.

You can preach to yourself and say, I've been given access to the ultimate inner ring, the only one that matters, the very source of light and life and love. If I have that, why do I need this?

And if you do find yourself on the inside, you'll be the opposite of the person who tries to keep everybody out because you don't need that to give you any value.

You already have that in God himself. And you know you've met those people who are really not that important but they go out of their way to make sure you know how important they are.

[30 : 27] Reinforcing the boundaries. And then occasionally you meet somebody who maybe is very important. You know, maybe they are pretty elite and maybe they are a pretty high level person and maybe they really don't have a lot of time and maybe they really have access to people and to social circles that I could never dream of having.

And yet when you meet them they have a kind of openness and warmth and magnanimity and a kind of a welcoming spirit and you have these encounters and you're like wow, I just met and I thought they would be so standoffish but that was amazing.

Just in that moment I felt like I was the only one in the room. You know these encounters and you meet somebody like that and you think where does that kind of open magnanimity come from?

That's the fruit of what the gospel can do.

And so what you began to see as this story takes hold is the reversal of the inner ring dynamic. So when Christians talk about charity that's the reversal of this dynamic.

When we talk as Christians about hospitality do you know that hospitality is the polar opposite of the inner ring? Rather than casting other people out so that you can feel good it's welcoming other people in and making them feel like family.

[31 : 39] It's the exact opposite. So Advent, friends brothers and sisters this is my prayer for us is that the gospel would take more and more and more hold of us in our own lives and as a church that we would more and more and more be this kind of family who can welcome others in just as Jesus Christ has welcomed us in to the fellowship with God himself.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father we recognize that these are words that to the extent that they reflect you and your will have power and so we pray that your spirit would embed that which is from you in our hearts that they would produce this kind of fruit.

If anyone here is particularly beset by this or if this has brought up any wounds or hurt or guilt or insecurity that rather than burying those things we would see this as an opportunity to interact with you through the gospel to have your gospel speak healing into these places in our lives.

We pray this for our good and for your glory in your son's name. Amen.