

Reconciliation: Breaking down dividing walls

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[0 : 0 0] chapter 2. We're going to read the whole chapter, but we're going to read it in two sections. And so first of all, we're going to read verses 1 to 10 to hear the before and after of Christian experience. Paul is going to describe to these believers what their life was like before knowing Jesus, and then the difference that God's grace to them in the sending of Jesus has made. It's the same story that's true of everyone who's a follower of Jesus. So let's hear God's Word in Ephesians chapter 2.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. Amen. We'll pick up our reading there in a few minutes, but before... One more thing to say. I have, for those of you who need to pick them up, copies of instruments in the Redeemer's hands. So folks from the elders, women's pastoral team, there's some there. I've also got some more coming. Let's turn in our Bibles to Ephesians chapter 2 from verse 11 to verse 22. And we'll keep our Bibles open here. If you don't have a copy of the Bible, well, it's up on the screen, but there's also Bibles in both window shelves at the back.

And so let's hear the Word of God once more. 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. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the

Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Amen. This is God's Word. So we're continuing this week to think about the truth of reconciliation. As we continue to think about what the Bible teaches us about the gospel, what is the good news of what God has done in and through Jesus, and how should that change and shape how we live our lives as God's people today.

[5 : 29] And we begin by recognizing the tragedy of dividing lines. As we see week after week the unfolding sadness and destruction that's going on in Ukraine, the new reality after the Russians illegally annexed some of those parts of Ukrainian land is that they have set up, as it were, a new iron curtain, making it incredibly difficult for people to move around in their own nation. And one of the effects of that is that families and communities have been divided. There were lots of stories of anxious and distressed people wondering, will I be able to cross this barrier to be able to be reunited to my husband or to see my children again. And sadly, this is the kind of reality that's all too familiar in our world.

societies polarized by politics, segregated by race, divided by the inequalities of wealth, the haves and the have-nots.

There are scars on every society based on divisions of different kinds. But we also sadly establish our own personal, invisible walls. Perhaps because of anger, because of jealousy or pride. Perhaps a lack of understanding, a lack of patience, a failure to forgive, a failure to extend a welcome. We too create division.

So there are scars on every human heart. Sadly, there are scars of division within God's church.

And the Bible says to us very clearly, this is far from the ideal. To understand what God's ideal is for community, we go back to the Garden of Eden. We go back to the Garden and what we find is flourishing.

[7 : 57] And we find healthy relationships between Adam and Eve and their God, and between Adam and Eve as husband and wife. Before there was sin, relationships were good. But once sin came in, there was division.

Adam and Eve hiding from God. Adam and Eve turning on one another, pointing the finger of blame at each other. And that extends to the next generation, where Cain, in jealousy and anger, killed his own brother.

And that story of division is one that we can trace through the story of the Bible, and we trace it through the story of human history. So as we recognize that reality, the question for us to consider is, is where is hope to be found?

When we understand that all is not well. And again, we look to the Bible for our hope, and we look to God who promised one will come, who will bring blessing, who will bring peace, who will reconcile. That one is the Lord Jesus. And what we see in Ephesians 2 is Paul reminding Christians of what God has done in and through the Lord Jesus. Last week, if you were here, we thought about reconciliation on the vertical level. How God has acted through the Lord Jesus to deal with that sin barrier, that barrier that creates our natural hostility against God and means a holy God is opposed to us because of sin. But God deals with that barrier by sending his own son Jesus to be the Savior, one who would bear the sin of his people, one who would remove the guilt by taking it on himself. Jesus, the one who establishes peace in his own body so that we can be reconciled to God.

Well, this week, we're still going to see that, but we're going to think too about reconciliation on the horizontal level. How by God's design, he is establishing peace with one another within the church.

[10 : 20] And one of the things that we always need to remind ourselves as Christians is that by God's design, the Christian church has both a unique message and a unique power. Because we have the gospel, because we have God's grace, because we have the Spirit dwelling within us, the church has the gospel, and it is the gospel that brings deep and lasting healing and restoration. And so we need to remember we have a message that the world both needs and one, though often they don't realize it's to the church and to the gospel they need to come. So what we're going to see today is that because Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and reconciled us to one another within the church, reconciliation should be the goal of God's church. So let's turn in our text to verses 11 to 13.

To think about the privilege of reconciliation. Look at verse 13. Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

So we have thought about 21st century lines of division in society. Well, there was those existing in the first century, and one of the greatest divisions with the most hostility was that between a Jew and a Gentile. A couple of examples from Jewish teaching in the first century, they were instructing people, if you come across a Gentile woman at the point of giving birth, do not offer any help, because we do not want another Gentile in the world.

If your son or daughter chooses to marry a Gentile, hold a funeral, because that child is dead to you.

That's the line of division that existed in that society. But here's the amazing truth, before we even look at the details, who's Paul writing to? Paul is writing to Gentile Christians, and they now share the same church with Jewish Christians. So God, by his saving grace, has overcome some of the deepest and most fundamental barriers in society. And Paul wants to remind these Gentiles of their privilege. And he wants to do that by, first of all, showing them their disadvantages, showing them the barriers that stood against them. So let's look at those briefly.

[13 : 03] First of all, in verse 11, let's begin. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth. So let's just stop there. So there's the first barrier, simply their birth. By being born a Gentile, they stand on the wrong side of the tracks. It goes further. Remember that formerly you are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision. What's this speaking about? This is speaking about prejudice in society. This is speaking about insults being traded, verbal grenades being thrown by Jew and by Gentile against one another. That's a barrier to entering the church. Continues, verse 12. Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ.

Because you were Gentiles, because you had no access to the Old Testament, you had no idea that God had promised a Savior, the Christ. One who would bring healing and restoration and establish peace between people and God. They didn't know that. He goes further. You were excluded, verse 12, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise. So they were on the outside of God's kingdom. None of the rights and privileges of a citizen. They were foreigners to all of those wonderful covenant promises that God had established with his people in the Old Testament.

By birth, by rights, they were not part of that. And so as Paul will say to them at the end of verse 12, remember that you were without hope and without God in the world. You had no living hope, living in fear and living in ignorance.

You had no true God. You were worshipping idols. All of these barriers. And if that was the end of the story, that'd be total despair, wouldn't it? That would be like hearing a desperate diagnosis without ever hearing of the cure. But that's not the gospel.

The gospel says, verse 13, but now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near. You were far, but now you've been moved near. They have been taken past the iron curtain.

[15 : 54] No longer in the gospel, outsiders. They are now insiders. To use the language of Miroslav Volf.

They've moved from exclusion to embrace. Now, how has that happened? Well, it's happened, Paul says, because Jesus Christ destroys division. It's by the blood of Christ that they are brought near.

What does the blood of Christ speak to us of? It speaks of his sacrificial death. It speaks of his giving his life to pay the price, to take the penalty for our sin and for our guilt.

So in that event in history, these Gentiles could be reconciled to God. And they're told that it's now in Christ Jesus that they are brought near. They have been united to him by faith.

They have this personal experience of what God has done in Jesus' death and resurrection. So this double separation, where they were separate from God and separate from the people of God, has been ended by Christ, by his grace, by the grace of God. Now, to think about ourselves here today in this room, some of us in this church have had wonderful privileges, brought up in Christian homes by Christian parents, brought up reading God's Word, taught how to pray, brought to church.

[17 : 43] We have had wonderful privileges as if we were those who were by nature near. But there are others who have not had that privilege. Speaking to a friend this week, 26 years of age before ever hearing about Jesus, who he was, what he had come to do. Somebody put it this way, some of us, it's as if, you know, English is our first language, so it's really easy and it's very natural. Other people don't have that privilege and have to wrestle with trying to learn a second language later in life.

Some have had great privilege, some didn't have those privileges. But here's the wonderful thing, is that Paul is saying that whether we think about ourselves and say, I was by nature near or I was by nature far away from God, there is one truth for us all, that God has reconciled sinners through Christ, that Jesus' blood shed on the cross pays the penalty for sin, breaks the power of sin in our lives for whoever we are as we look to Jesus in faith. Martin Luther King once said, love is the only power capable of turning an enemy into a friend. And what we see in the gospel is that God's love in Christ does that twice over. God's love that comes to us through Jesus has the power to end our war with God and it has the power to end the wars that we establish with one another too.

So as we think about the privilege of reconciliation that Paul brings to these Gentile Christians, we need to recognize the privilege that there is in the gospel. But we also need to hear this invitation as well. Because Paul would say to us, come to Jesus to be brought near to God.

come to the Lord Jesus as Savior to be brought near to be brought among the people of God. It is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that moves us from being far to being near. And it's also a reminder to us as Christians to treasure what we've been given. As Christians, we should never lose sight of how hopeless we were by nature. That Ephesians 2 is our spiritual biography. And so we should be profoundly grateful for the mercy of God in sending Jesus to reconcile us. Well, if that's the privilege, the central section, verses 14 to 18, wants to draw our attention to the power of reconciliation. Look at that first phrase in verse 14. He himself, Christ Jesus himself is our peace. And in this section, we're introduced to what Paul calls, in verse 14, the dividing wall of hostility.

You know, so picture what might a dividing wall of hostility look like. In my head, I think of the Berlin Wall. But there are examples that we still see today. So during COVID times, in sort of poorer countries, there were lots of stories of Christians being denied access to aid and support given to other citizens simply because they were Christians, places like Myanmar. And that kind of inequality and that prejudice still exists, dividing walls of hostility. Well, let's take in our minds a very quick tour to Herod the Great Temple in first century Jerusalem. So the temple building, it was elevated. It was up on a high place.

[21 : 41] And then there were two outer courts. There was the Court of the Jews, five steps down, and then another 14 steps down, the Court of the Gentiles. Now doesn't that say something about how the Jews regarded the Gentiles? This isn't God's design, but that's what they'd done. And between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Jews, there was a one and a half meter stone barricade.

And there were signs placed on that wall. In 1935, a team from a museum in Istanbul found one of those, a Greek sign. And here's what it said. It said this, No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death. There's a dividing wall of hostility.

Trespassers will be executed. There was a sinful prejudice in the first century world. There was a dividing wall of hostility.

But what does Paul say about the work of Jesus? Jesus Christ destroys division. Jesus, as it were, in a spiritual sense, took a sledgehammer to that wall in his death, breaking down the barrier so that Jew and Gentiles, so that anyone by faith might be part of God's kingdom.

The emphasis is on Jesus and his work. He himself is our peace. And there are four actions of Jesus as we see him as the ultimate peacemaker that we're going to see in our text. First of all, and we've already mentioned it, verse 14, Jesus has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by setting aside in his flesh, the law with its commands and regulations. So the coming of Jesus in the flesh has served to set aside the law with its commands and regulations.

[24 : 12] So one of the great barriers between Jew and Gentiles was the ceremonial laws that had been established. Food laws, laws about circumcision, since the coming of Jesus, what they pointed to had been fulfilled, and so they no longer had any place in God's church. So that barrier, it was designed to be taken away with the coming of Jesus. But Jesus has also, for his people, removed the condemnation that was due to us in the moral law. He's also taken that away by Jesus taking our sin and taking the penalty that we deserve to face. And he kindly and freely and graciously took that for us, thus securing our peace. So Jesus has destroyed the barrier. And he's done that for a purpose. Look at verse 15.

Jesus has created a new human race. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. Here's the wonderful way that Christians of any kind answer the question of our identity.

Not in terms of Jew and Gentile, not in terms of ethnicity or cultural background or gender. I am a new creation in Christ. Those barriers that serve to divide do not define us, should not define the church. Because Jesus has come to make peace. To make in himself one new humanity, one new creation.

What else has Jesus done in making peace? He has reconciled. Look at verse 16. And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.

So Jesus Christ's sacrifice in his one body has dealt with the sin, has dealt with the hostility of his people towards God, has taken the hostility that a holy God has towards sinful people. Jesus has taken that so that instead of condemnation and separation, we can enjoy peace.

[26 : 52] We can enjoy peace with God and peace with one another. Because Jesus has reconciled.

And Jesus also, we're told, preached. He came and preached peace to you who are far away, and peace to those who are near. For through him, we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Same message to those who are by nature far away, to those who are by nature near. It's the same good news that Jesus is the Son of God and he has come to be the only Savior for sinners. And that in trusting in Jesus and his work on the cross, that we have the same access to the one Father in heaven, by the one Holy Spirit who gives us new life, who causes us to cry out in our hearts, Abba, Father.

That's true of every Christian. So the peace that Jesus creates is peace in the gospel that unites us around himself. So that nothing that could divide us is ever going to be as strong as what unites us in the gospel. Because what unites us is our strong Savior and the gospel that he has brought. So Paul draws us deliberately to the person of Christ who is good news, who is our peace. Where do we find the grace and the help to be reconciled by looking to Jesus? We fix our eyes on Jesus who is our peace.

One really profound example of this, Corrie ten Boom. Some of you will know Corrie ten Boom's story. She, along with her family in Holland in the 1940s, were hiding Jews from the Nazis. And eventually, she and her sister were discovered and sent to a concentration camp in Ravensbrück, where her sister died, but Corrie survived. And in 1947, she went to Germany to preach and to share her story, to talk about the good news of God's forgiveness. And one evening in Munich, as she was concluding her meeting, as she saw someone approach, and she recognized that this was the most notorious guard from that Ravensbrück concentration camp. He didn't recognize her. And he came to speak to her and he said, I have come to discover that God in Jesus has forgiven me. Can you forgive me? And do you know her response at that moment? She said, I can move my hand to extend a welcome. You must provide the feeling.

[30 : 07] And as she considered in that moment, the gospel of God's forgiveness of her, she felt a genuine love for that former prison guard, now a brother in Christ. And she forgave him and she embraced him.

The powerful grace of God in Christ is such that guilty rebel sinners are forgiven and embraced and welcomed by God.

So we are invited to turn from sin, turn to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ, and to know reconciliation with him. But we also know that the grace of God, as it's poured out into our hearts, gives us a heart full of love that comes from God, that enables us by grace to embrace the role of being a peacemaker.

That we would be enabled to make peace with one another. Because we know that the gospel ends barriers of division.

And we know that's God's design. And let's think about that in our last section, verses 19 to 22. Let's think about the portraits of reconciliation that we have here.

[31 : 37] Look at verse 20. That phrase with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Verse 19 begins, Consequently.

There are consequences. There are results that flow from the reality that Jesus has come to make peace. What is the consequence? What do we see in the kingdom of God? What do we see in the church?

Well, Paul paints up three different portraits of this reconciliation that Jesus has come to establish. Let's speak to us of unity in the church in the Lord Jesus.

The first of those portraits is that of being a new kingdom. So look at verse 19 again. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people.

Those ethnic barriers are gone. The people of God share the same citizenship. No longer foreigners by grace brought near.

[32 : 51] What does our passport say? Our passport says we are citizens of heaven. Christ makes us a new society under him as our king.

So we have a new kingdom. But we are also, verse 19, made members of his household. In Christ we are also a new family. And in this family, we share the same father in heaven. We share the same standing as brothers and sisters in Christ, heirs to the kingdom. By the grace of God, we are adopted into God's family.

That God, by his grace, has reconciled us. That's the heart of our father. And so one of the family values then of the church is that we pursue unity.

[34 : 02] We value reconciliation. So there's a new kingdom and there's a new family. And also, in verses 20 to 22, there is a new temple.

What a great hope. The old temple, the physical temple, that had that dividing wall of hostility, that's not now where God dwells. Where does God dwell now?

He dwells among his people, in the church. And the church, we're told in verse 20, has a shared foundation. We're built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

The church is built on the message which is all about Christ. Christ. The church is built on Christ himself. He is the chief cornerstone.

Just as the cornerstone was so important to give strength and stability and alignment to the foundation of the building, Jesus is where our strength is found. Jesus is the one that we need to line up with.

[35 : 07] And we're told, in verse 21, in him, in Christ, the whole building is joined together. Jesus isn't just the foundation, he's also the cement.

That the gospel of God's grace is what binds us together. And it rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Who are we as the people of God? We are a new home where God dwells among his people. What wonderful images speaking of the reconciliation and the unity that God is creating and that God desires.

Isn't that a beautiful portrait? Doesn't that give us a longing that we would see this? Perhaps it gives us a longing for our heavenly kingdom, for our heavenly home, where this is true for the people of God for all eternity.

But doesn't it also give us a goal to pursue here and now? Paul is saying to us, we must aim for this ideal.

[36 : 23] If this is the masterpiece that God is creating in Christ, then if we are building up division where Jesus is seeking peace, it's like we're taking a can of spray paint and we're graffitiing all over this wonderful masterpiece that God is creating.

We must pursue unity and reconciliation. Imagine this ideal in the church where the strongest of hatreds and prejudice are being overcome, where old wounds are being healed as forgiveness is extended, where local and foreign from around the world can be welcomed and treated equally, and only because we have Christ in common.

What incredible message this would be to ourselves and to the world. Here is where you find peace the world dreams of. And so Paul is reminding us that by the power of Christ, we can and we must both show and tell the gospel that a reconciled and united church is God's missionary plan to show a divided world the gospel is true, that Jesus Christ transforms hearts and lives because Christ Jesus has brought his people near.

Because Christ Jesus himself is our peace. Because Christ Jesus is our cornerstone. Let's pray.

Let's pray that we would see these things to be true. Lord, our God, once again, we are so thankful for reconciliation, we're so thankful for your grace that transforms hearts and lives and relationships.

[38 : 27] And Lord, we pray that as we recognize your ideal of people being united in Christ Jesus, of barriers being broken down through Christ Jesus, of peace being established because of Christ's work on the cross, and we pray that you would cause us to confess where we have caused division, you would cause us to trust in you in order to seek reconciliation.

Lord, that we would be a church and we would be a people of God who show and tell the glory of the gospel to a world that so desperately needs healing and unity.

we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.