

10/20/2019 - Ephesians 2:11-22

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[0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Odo.

You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. We're going to turn our attention to the book of Ephesians. If you are new with us, we have been looking this fall at Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

If you've never walked through a book of the Bible like this, I would really encourage you, if you want to walk along with us, spend some time this week reading through the whole letter. You get the whole sense of what Paul is trying to do as he does that.

And so we are in one passage in the second chapter of that book. And it's a really beautiful passage. And so I want to read that to you from Ephesians chapter 2.

It's written in your bulletin. So follow along with me. Ephesians chapter 2.

[1 : 3 2] Ephesians chapter 2.

Ephesians chapter 2.

Amen. Amen.

This is God's word. Let's pray and ask his blessing upon it. Father, we pray that, or I pray, that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts might be pleasing and acceptable to you.

Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. We pray it in Christ. Amen. I'm a big fan of a band called the Avett Brothers. I don't know if y'all know who the Avett Brothers are.

[3 : 1 1] Hopefully you do. If you don't, go home, look them up. You should listen to them. But this week was fun. I had a meeting in Knoxville and I was coming back and it was kind of evening time and I had a few hours to myself.

And so I decided to drive out into the Smokies. And it was one of those beautiful afternoons that we had this week. I rolled down the windows. I went on these back roads up in the mountains and I turned on Avett Brothers and just rolled for like three hours.

And it was the best three hours I've spent in a couple of weeks. It was amazing. And you know how when you're listening to something that's familiar, you sometimes hear it differently.

That happened. I heard one of their songs a little bit differently. Maybe you know this song. It's called Ill with Want. And here's how it starts. And this is the chorus.

I really like that song because he's talking about, he's trying to articulate something that's in the depth of his soul.

[4 : 4 0] In particular, he sees his own greed and his own willingness to use whatever he has at his disposal to meet his desires. He's willing to take advantage of other people, to disregard other people in order to feed himself with what he wants.

And in seeing that about himself, he sees that there's this distortion of who he is. He even says he doesn't recognize himself. Isn't that interesting?

That he sees such a distortion in who he is that he doesn't recognize himself. You know, the Bible's pretty clear that when it says that all humanity is sinful.

That we are broken by sin. But the Avod brothers are talking about something, about those deep feelings that kind of go beyond the abstract theological, you know, descriptions.

He's talking about something you feel in your bones. Something that is just not right in the world and not right in me. And sometimes you see it and you don't even recognize it and you don't even recognize yourself.

[5 : 45] You know, I see that in myself. I am known for, in our house, when I get angry, I use really harsh words. And sometimes those words come out of my mouth and I don't even recognize who I am.

And I hate it about myself and I have to apologize to my family. And each of us have those things. That there are these moments where we get this clarity about who we are on the inside and we feel it in our bones.

We see it out there. We see it in the world. We see it on the news. We see it in our own hearts that something is not right. And the Bible actually has a word for this.

It calls it the state of alienation. The Bible says that because of the power of sin, we are alienated. We're alienated from a right relationship with God, vertically. We're alienated from a horizontal relationships with people.

You know, our relationships with people are broken. Sometimes by our own sin, sometimes by death. But we're also alienated from our own selves. We don't even recognize ourselves sometimes.

[6 : 48] But, Paul says, Jesus is our peace. He is breaking down the dividing wall of hostility that runs through every person's soul.

And through every relationship that we have in every culture. He's destroying alienation. And that's what this passage is about. This passage is a pretty simple passage.

Paul is talking about that there is a problem with alienation in this world. There's a problem. He talks about Jesus as the peace who is the solution. And then he talks about what the consequences are.

Problem, solution, consequences. Super simple and yet glorious and profound. So what's the problem? The problem is alienation. And alienation manifests itself in all kinds of different ways.

I mean, the Avett brothers talk about it. But you see it in our culture in the strife that you see in marriages. You see it in our sexuality. You see it in the violence of our culture that there's this alienation.

[7 : 46] But in Ephesians, for the Ephesian Christians, the problem was actually rivalries. Now we know rivalries. I mean, you know, Auburn, Alabama. Yankees, Red Sox.

Tennessee and UTC maybe. I don't know. Somebody. Maybe next year. We know what rivalries look like.

And sometimes they're silly like, you know, sports teams. But sometimes they're a little bit deeper. Like the rivalries between Republican and Democrat. Between, you know, the flyover country. And the coastal elites.

You know, we talk about those kinds of things. Some of those are funny. But many of them are deep. And for the Ephesians in particular, the rivalry that they were dealing with was between Jew and Gentile.

Jew and Gentile. So this was a Roman city. It was a big city. It was an important city right on the coast of Turkey. It was a cosmopolitan and religious city.

- [8 : 47] And when the church was born there, what happened was it gathered people from all kinds of places, from all kinds of backgrounds. And they were different. The Jews were fairly newly immigrated to that area of the world.
- And they were people who were religious. They held on to their biblical values that respected the family and tradition and morality and theology and authority.
- All those kinds of things. The Gentiles were new to the faith. They'd been living in this very secularized culture. They were the new kids on the block, but they were also in their home turf.
- They were in their hometown. And they came to faith differently. They didn't have that same respect for tradition and history that the Jewish believers had. For the Jews, religious customs were the way that they measured faith.
- And they had a lot of them. We read about them. Diana read for us from Colossians. And I'll just mention a few of them. You were supposed to eat certain foods and not eat other foods.
- [9 : 56] Supposed to drink certain drinks and not drink other drinks. You had to make sure that you celebrated all the right holidays. You had to be sure that you celebrated the Sabbath in the right particular ways.
- You had to make sure that you spoke in the right religious language. I mean, the Jews had all kinds of cultural and religious expectations.
- Christians, especially circumcision. Circumcision was that Old Testament right that was used to mark out who were the people of God and who weren't.
- And so these new Gentile Christians, you know, they weren't doing it. Or at least not consistently. And so there was a problem. And Paul is somewhat subtle in his rebuke here.
- But he picks up on the religious name calling that's going on in Ephesus. So did you notice that he says that he's talking to the Gentiles and he says the ones who are called the uncircumcision.
- [10 : 57] He's clearly, and he quotes it. It's in quotes in your Bible. And he's clearly picking up on the name calling that the Jews were using for the Gentiles. They're calling them the uncircumcision. Not to be outdone.
- The Gentiles are sniping back. Well, you guys are the circumcision. Great job. You're all holy and high and mighty. It's petty. It's petty. And Paul is not having any of it.
- I don't want any of this stuff is what Paul is saying. The problem is, is there's a kernel of truth to all of those name callings, right? To all of that pettiness.
- And that kernel of truth, by pointing it out, each of those groups are attempting to establish some sort of spiritual superiority for themselves.
- That kernel of truth that the Jews were saying the uncircumcision of the Gentiles is that the Gentiles had been alienated from God's people.
- [11 : 53] They were outsiders. In fact, Paul talks about this in, he starts in with the Jews in verse 12. And he gives five different ways that the Gentiles were alienated.
- Alienated. Verse 12. Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ. You did not have salvation. You didn't even know that salvation was something that was possible for you.
- You were separated. You had no idea that Christ had come. They were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. They weren't part of God's visible people.

They were strangers to the covenants of promise. Why is it that the people of Israel thought that they were especially God's people? Well, because they had God's covenant promises.

It was God saying, you will be my people and I will be your God. And that's how the Israelite people knew themselves to be unique. They didn't have that. They had no hope.

[12 : 54] They were without God in the world. They were alienated. They were strangers. You know, and that alienation that Paul is talking about that was true of the Gentiles is a picture of what it is like to be separated and alienated from God in this world.

That's what every non-believer experiences. That's what you experienced before you came to Christ. And so now Paul is essentially saying, how dare you?

How dare you Jewish people, you people who are insiders, how dare you tell the Gentiles that they're the uncircumcision, they're the outsiders? You're saying that they're alienated like they were before they were saved.

You're diminishing the role of salvation in their life. And the ironic thing is, by implying that they're alienated, they deepen the alienation between the two groups.

They become more and more rivals. You see that? It's pretty remarkable. You see, the problem is, it's not that the two of them, the Jews and Gentiles, came from different cultures, that they had disagreements.

[14 : 05] That wasn't the problem. The problem was, is that they attached religious identity to those cultural expressions. You know? If you ate certain things or didn't eat certain things, the Jewish person might look down on them.

They would view you as spiritually suspicious. You'd be judged as not worthy. But that goes both ways, right? You know this. The less spiritually minded people, when they begin to get converted, they look at the stodgy, old school, traditional people and talk about their lifelessness, right?

It goes both ways. It's the same root. It's coming from the same place, which is using cultural markers. Let me say it this way. Confusing their cultural preferences for doctrinal truth.

It's a confusion. It's bad theology is what it is. See, the problem wasn't that they disagreed. You know, within the church, there's always going to be disagreement.

Disagreement. That's good and right to disagree and to seek truth. But using that disagreement as a source of spiritual authority, of spiritual superiority over other people.

[15 : 22] I'm better than them because I do this or I don't do that. Or I believe this or I don't believe that. And what it does is it plays into a deepening alienation amongst the people of God.

You see this in America, right? I mean, you just have to scratch a little bit and you see this in our own context. I mean, think about just one example.

If you follow, if you are new to church, you may not realize that there are lots of disagreements between Christians. Probably do. But you may not. And you may not realize that online you see all kinds of discussion.

And in particular, there is a lot of animosity between Christians who are passionate about racial reconciliation on the one hand. And those who are passionate about traditional doctrinal integrity on the other.

And they often see themselves as opposites. And they throw a lot of name calling towards one another. They use it as ways to judge one another.

[16 : 27] You know, if you are into traditional doctrinal integrity, you look at the people who are generally on the left and you call them social justice warriors. You know, or snowflakes. You use name calling.

But if you are on the left and you are seeing people who do not seem to value the same sorts of racial reconciliation, they often get called racists. It is ugly and it is petty.

You know, it is different people working out a faith in Christ. And they are using their cultural forms. They are baptizing them as doctrinal truth.

And then they are using that as a weapon to gain their own sort of spiritual superiority. And the alienation deepens.

And that is the problem. That is the problem. I went to a workshop yesterday. And we were talking about a lot of things. But one of the conversations that we talked about was tattoos in America.

[17 : 31] And it is super interesting. In fact, the numbers will tell you that for Americans 18 to 40, it is something like 41% of all Americans 18 to 40 have a tattoo.

And so our culture is becoming more tattooed every year. And it is fascinating because if you study these things, you find a lot of really interesting things that people are doing in the tattoo culture.

And one of the lines that the guy who is leading this workshop said was, I want to get it right. He says that what you find is that people are writing their deepest secrets on their skin.

They are writing their fears and their hopes and their regrets and their losses to death.

This is the new tombstone. This is the body. And they are writing their dreams and their hopes for who they might become. They are writing it in permanent ink on their skin.

[18 : 35] What is happening there? It is that their internal world is breaking out from inside their skin, the walls of their skin, and they are writing it on their lives, on their bodies.

They are desperately hoping that the internal alienation that they feel will be satisfied. And that is what we do when we build these rivalries, these factions, these tribes.

When we look at other Christians especially and say, well, I'm better than that group because of this and this and this. Or I'm better than that group. At least I'm not as bad as that group.

It's the same thing as the tattoo culture is that we are taking our internal hopes and fears and dreams and our confusion about how the world is changing.

And that's coming out to the outside in the way that we tribalize ourselves. Is tribalize a word? I'm not sure that's a word. We become tribal. And this is not a new thing.

[19 : 45] This is not just in the Trump era. This was happening. You remember Martin Luther King said that 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour of the week in America.

It was happening before that. If you look back at the discussions around prohibition in the 20s. And it goes further. That even within the church there is this rivalry and factionalism.

If you want to see, if you want a little diagnostic to see where this is in your life, let me just give you this question. Ask yourself this question. What is one part of who you are that if it was taken away, you would struggle to believe that God really loved you?

One part of your identity. One part of your identity. One part of your identity. That if it was taken away, you wouldn't know if God loved you anymore. That might be the place that you're holding on to for spiritual significance.

Maybe it's your wealth. Maybe it's your education that you think of yourself as sophisticated, you know, enlightened. Maybe it's your morality.

[20 : 56] If people thought that you were immoral like those people and your reputation was diminished, they'd kill you. Yeah. So, see, if this is happening in the church, you know, is it possible that part of the reason for the alienation and division in our churches is rooted in my individual sense of spiritual superiority over other people?

Is it possible that the problem out in the church is not all these big cultural shifts, but it's the problem is me. The problem is millions of individual people trying to satisfy their own spiritual superiority by making themselves better than other people and desperately clinging on to something that makes them feel that.

Is it any wonder that the church in our country has lost the ability to speak to our culture? We can't even talk to each other.

Is it any wonder that they've stopped listening? Because they're not listening to us. Maybe this is the place to start. Maybe this is what Paul is trying to get us to see is the problem is deep.

It's really deep. But there's a solution. The solution, of course, is Jesus. There's these great words in verse, is it 14? No, verse 13.

[22 : 30] But now. Earlier in chapter 2, he says, but God. There is this problem. Now God has entered in. It's the same idea of God's grace entering in. There was these two words that change everything.

Now God has done something. See, when Jesus suffered on the cross, when he was crucified, when he died, when he bled on the cross, his blood was poured out for the sins of this world.

And so Jesus was accomplishing the removal of alienation forever. He's destroying alienation. Paul says that Jesus himself is our peace.

Peace is not an easy feeling. Peace is a person. It's the work of Christ has established peace. Jesus' death has destroyed alienation and rivalries that we use to separate people.

Look at verse 14. He himself is our peace. He has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

[23 : 38] Abolishing the commandments. Expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

That we have made all these ways to fuel our superiority. Rivalry, division, superiority are all denials of the work of Christ on the cross.

You know, it's interesting that he keeps using this phrase. It's repeated three times, I think. You who were far off and you who are near. You know, even when we talk about non-Christians in the church, we talk about those who are out there and those who are in here.

And Paul is saying, no, no, no. We cannot talk that way. We cannot talk about us and them. Insider, outsider. That language has to be demolished. That Christ, in his cross, is bringing together one new person.

The Jews had had God's blessings for a long time. But that did not make them any better than the Gentiles who just came. The near and the far need Jesus just as desperately as one another.

[24 : 47] And this is such a glory for the church because the church can now become the place where these disparate groups of rivals can become one. Where the old divisions of class, and race, and morality, and preference, and language, and politics, and music, and the old joke, the color of the carpet that splits churches.

All of these places of division are now brought under the glorious banner which is Christ and his cross. The blood of Christ establishing peace.

I mean, that's why this passage is maybe the most glorious passage about the church in the whole Bible. It's because of that. So what are the results? Problems, solution, results.

Just briefly. There's three specific results of Jesus' work that I want you to see. The first one is in verse 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.

You are citizens. Instead of being alienated, without a place to belong, you now have been called a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. You're no longer unknown and rejected.

[26 : 05] You're known. You aren't seen suspiciously. You know, at this time, the temple in Jerusalem that Jesus would have known and Paul would have known, when you went to the temple, there was a wall.

And there was a separation between the Gentile areas where they could come and worship and the Jewish areas where only Jews could go. And at every doorway, there were signs. And they were written in multiple languages so that everybody coming would be able to read it in their own language.

And it said, Gentiles may not cross this line under the pain of death. And they would kill Gentiles who walked into the temple, to the holy places of the temple.

Paul is deliberately using this language of the dividing wall of hostility to talk about the removal of barriers in the church.

And so how disastrous is it for these Jewish and Gentile Christians to then name call one another, implying that the other is a stranger and an alien and they're outsiders?

[27 : 12] How that undercuts the honor of being one of God's children? Friends, we've got to watch the language we use online.

The language we use to talk about people who believe different things than us. It is a dishonoring of God's work in this world, in the life of these people.

Sure, we can disagree. Sure, we can think maybe there's a lack of wisdom in where they're headed. But boy, more than that is a dangerous road that Paul does not want us to walk on.

They deserve the honor as fellow citizens in Christ's kingdom. Okay, second, you're part of Christ's family. So citizen, family. For through him we both have, verse 18, we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So you're no longer strangers and aliens. You're fellow citizens, saints, and members of the household of God. You're part of the family. Some of you desperately need to hear that. For some of you, the family you grew up in was the place of alienation, of loss, of fear.

[28 : 23] And you need to know that the church is designed to be the place where you become family. That's what Grace and Peace is trying to do. We want you to be a part of that.

Come to a missional community group. Get to know somebody that you don't know. Be part of the family. Okay, thirdly. So citizen, family, temple.

This is interesting. The temple was the physical representation of God's presence among his people. Right? Whether it was the tabernacle in the wilderness or the temple in Jerusalem, that was the place where God was physically present.

Okay? Look at what Paul says here. So then, you are, let's see, citizens and saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets.

Christ himself being the cornerstone. He's talking about a building in whom the whole structure is being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

[29 : 26] In him, you are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit. You are his temple, the place of God's presence.

Boy, there's so much dignity in this passage. God is saying, you don't have to have a self-salvation strategy. You don't have to figure out how you're better than all those other people out there.

Come to Christ, because in Christ you have everything that you need. And when you have a whole group of people that are doing that, it transforms into this thing called the church.

But you have to see your own part in it. There's this great story about G.K. Chesterton. You know who he is? He was that British author and writer from kind of before World War II in England.

And the Sunday Times of London came out with the editorial board, I guess, solicited people's opinions on what's wrong with the world today.

[30 : 32] What's wrong with the world today? And Chesterton wrote a very short letter to the editors. And he said, dear sirs, I am. That was it.

I am the problem in the world. And what he meant was not that he is the problem in the entire world. What he meant was that each one of us individually has this problem, this alienation from God and from other people and from ourselves that is part of who we are.

And if we won't acknowledge that problem and its reality and the effects that it has on other people, we will never be a part of God's healing of the world. We will never be a part of anything.

We have to start there. It starts with the language that you use. It starts with the way that you judge other people. What I've noticed is it starts with my eyes.

I see it with my eyes first. I look down on people. It's reflecting my heart. Your heart, the cries of your heart are coming out in your actions and in your life and in your associations.

[31 : 42] And if you begin to take stock of that, you begin to be brought into this gospel family where it begins to change the way that you interact.

And then we have the possibility as Christians, as the church, to begin to speak to our culture about what is true and right and good. But it has to start here.

Think of somebody like William Wilberforce, who was the engine, the primary vocal mouthpiece in Parliament for the ending of slavery in England.

It began with the personal transformation in him and the other people in his circles. And then from there they were able to speak. And we have to speak to the division and the tribalism and the injustice in our day.

The Christian church must speak to the problems of race, to the problems of justice, to the problems that are all around us, of morality.

[32 : 44] We have to speak to these. But we can't do it if we're motivated by our own spiritual superiority. Can't do it. It'll never work.

And it hasn't worked. Just look around. It's not working. And it's our problem. And it's, we need individually to come to Christ and see his renewing work to build us into the church.

Okay. I don't know how that can happen. It's too big for us. We need God's spirit. We need teachers like Paul to lead us.

So let's pray and ask him to lead us. Our Father, thank you for the Apostle Paul. Thank you for the way that he has a vision for the church that is so much bigger than our vision.

And we want it. It touches something in us that we deeply desire. And Lord, I pray that you would help us. That you would help us to see rightly.

[33 : 51] To follow him. And to follow you in this world. We pray it in the name of Christ and for his glory. Amen.