

God's New Community

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Preacher: Cedric Moss

[0 : 00] Well, no doubt many of you, like me, have been following the news regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I honestly started to get sick over it.

! Not physically sick, but not sick like that, but really sick.

I was trying to find myself off of it and to put my eyes more on the Lord and to trust in the Lord. And so I've read and watched a lot of content, but as I thought about it, there are two bits of what I have seen and read that linger in my mind as I reflect back on all that I've seen.

The first is a video of a group of people, I think a family, and they're gathered, they're huddled together, and they're singing the song, He Shall Hold Me Fast.

And the second is a joint statement that I read that was put out by a group of Reformed and Evangelical seminaries in Ukraine and Russia.

[1 : 18] So these are seminaries in both of the countries that are at war at the moment. And I thought I'd read some parts of it for us this morning.

And this is what they wrote together. The Christian Church has been instituted by the Lord Jesus Himself, created by the Word of God and directed by the Holy Spirit.

The Church confesses one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, His gospel and law. Therefore, as part of the Church and under the Lordship of Christ, we are called to speak the truth and expose deceit.

In the light of Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, we consider it necessary to strongly condemn the open and unjustified aggression aimed at destroying the statehood and independence of Ukraine, and based on the blatant lies from the lips of the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, and the country's top leadership.

We confess the real and unlimited power of God over all countries and continents, as well as over all kings and rulers.

[2 : 44] Therefore, nothing in all creation can interfere with the fulfillment of the good and perfect will of God. We, together with the first Christians, affirm Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.

We ask you to pray for the peace of the people of Ukraine and for courage and wisdom for Christian churches so that they continue to serve those in need.

We pray for our authorities and put our hope in the King of kings and Lord of lords, who is and who remains our refuge and fortress, even in time of war.

That's a statement from leaders in seminaries and no doubt in churches from two nations that are at war.

And it's a powerful example of how the kingdom of God and our citizenship in it transcends and overcomes some of the deepest issues that can so easily divide us.

[4 : 01] And so how is this possible? How is it that Ukrainian Christians can embrace Russian Christians when Russian soldiers are invading their land and murdering and injuring loved ones and destroying property and decimating their cities?

How is it that Ukrainian Christians can embrace Russian Christians and this is not just true of the situation in Russia?

Why is it that people who belong to Christ are able to enjoy a bond as brothers and sisters that transcends all the divisions and all the allegiances in the world, whether they be race or nationality or ethnicity or social standing or a myriad of other things that divide us in the human race?

Why is it that there is a group of people who are able to overcome those divisions? Well, as we continue our extended sermon series in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the passage that we have come to this morning provides us with the answer to all of those questions.

And so if you've not yet done so, please turn in your Bible to Ephesians chapter 2 and our attention this morning is going to be directed to verses 11 through 22. Ephesians chapter 2, 11 to 22.

[5 : 44] If you're using one of the church Bibles, it's on page 976. Please follow along as I read. Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision which is made in the flesh by hands.

remember that you at that time you were at that time separated from Christ alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise having no hope and without God in the world.

but now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ for he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross thereby killing the hostility and he came and preached peace to you who were far off and came to those who and peace to those who were near for through him we both have access in one spirit to the father so then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and 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 also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the spirit let's pray together father we thank you for your word this morning we cry out that you would speak to us cause us to hear corporately cause us to hear individually what you would say to us Lord would you grant me grace and in this moment a special measure of your spirit to bring your word to your people and Lord would you grant illumination to all of us we pray and ask in Jesus name amen when the history of the world is considered and in particular the divisions of people is studied

I believe that there's no deeper division between people than the division that exists between Jews and Gentiles Gentiles and perhaps the most graphic example of this division between Jews and Gentiles in our lifetime is the Holocaust which took place in World War II when Hitler and Nazi Germany murdered some 6 million Jews which is approximately two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe at the time and they did so for one reason they were Jews they belonged to a nation of people whom God sovereignly chose to be his people under the old covenant and they were Jews and they were separate from all the other nations of the world collectively called

[10 : 28] Gentiles Gentiles but despite this hostility between Jews and Gentiles there are countless examples of Jews and Gentiles being united and embracing one another as brothers and sisters and this is especially seen in the church and from this passage before us we're able to see the reason which is that through Christ God reconciles and inhabits people who were separated from him and from one another that's what we see in this passage before us that through Christ God reconciles and inhabits people who were formerly separated from him formerly separated from one another and this brothers and sisters is the marvel of the gospel this is the marvel of the gospel and the hope of a divided world and it matters not what the division is between people in Christ that division can be reconciled and it matters not what the sin is it separates people from

God in Christ all sinners can be reconciled to God no matter who they are and no matter what they've done and that's the good news of the gospel and it's the good news in the passage before us the good news that we see in this passage can be summarized I think in three words and I want to use those three words to structure this morning's sermon around the first word is separation Paul addresses the issue of separation in verses 11 and 12 last week in verses 1 to 10 we considered the separation on a very personal level we considered how in our lost condition before God we were dead in our trespasses and sins how we lived disobedient lives like the rest of mankind and how God in his mercy saved us and gave us new life and enable us to walk in good works that he prepared for us before the foundation of the world and now

Paul is addressing the Ephesians in a more corporate sense he's reminding them that they are Gentiles and that as Gentiles they were at one time separated from the people of God and the covenants of promise that he had given to the people of God and now in chapter 3 we'll see next week Paul is going to talk in more detail about this special ministry that God gave him to preach to the Gentiles but here in these two verses he begins to touch on it and he's calling the Ephesians to contrast their former relationship to God and the people of God with their current relationship that they now enjoy and so he calls them to first remember who they were notice in verse 11 that Paul calls the

Ephesians Gentiles in the flesh now why does he do that why doesn't he just call them Gentiles why does he add the words in the flesh well he does so because he's touching on something that is very important in scripture a teaching that is very important in scripture concerning Jews and Gentiles a Gentile in the flesh is anyone who is not a natural or a physical descendant of Abraham notice in verse 11 he also refers to them as the uncircumcision they're Gentiles in the flesh also called the uncircumcision on the other hand a Jew in the flesh is anyone who is a natural or physical descendant of Abraham and they're called the circumcision or refers to them as the circumcision which relates to the covenant that God gave to Abraham that he was supposed to be faithful to to all of his male offspring and they were supposed to do the same for themselves and all of their servants now the other side of this is that there are Gentiles in the spirit there are Gentiles in the flesh and there are

Gentiles in the spirit or spiritual Gentiles or the spiritually uncircumcised and Jews in the spirit or spiritual Jews or the spiritually uncircumcised so there's a mirror for both of those physical terms there's the physical Gentile and there's the spiritual Gentile there's the physical Jew and there's the spiritual Jew the spiritual Gentiles are those who are not the true people of God and among spiritual Gentiles are natural Jews and natural Gentiles there are descendants of Abraham natural descendants of Abraham and there are other people in the world who are not naturally descended of Abraham who do not belong to God and they would be called spiritual Gentiles and then there are spiritual

[16:45] Jews and spiritual Jews are those who are the people of God the redeemed community and in this group of spiritual Jews are those who are natural descendants of Abraham they are literal Jews and there are those who are not they are Gentiles they have no descendancy from Abraham but they belong to God and this is what unites them together so this group of spiritual Gentiles spiritual Jews is comprised of people of all nations the Jewish nation and all the other nations of the world and so Paul is addressing these realities that existed between Jews and Gentiles in this passage and he's calling the Ephesians to remember how they were natural Gentiles Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by the Jews who are the circumcision notice the words that he uses at the end of verse 11 riches made by hands he's talking about

Jews who obeyed the covenant of circumcision which was done by hands and so Paul is distinguishing between physical and spiritual circumcision in the same way that he distinguished between physical Jews and Gentiles and spiritual Jews and spiritual Gentiles and in verse 12 he reminds them of their former state as physical Gentiles he tells them that not only were they separated from Christ but they were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and they were strangers to the promises of the covenants of promises that God had given to Israel and they had no hope and they were lost in this world without God and I think it's important for us to see in these two verses that bottom line

Jews and Gentiles were separated both from God and from one another because Jews and Gentiles alike were separated from Christ and so that was the corporate condition of Jews and Gentiles alike now Paul doesn't say much here doesn't stress it so much in verses 11 and 12 and so it's easy for us to miss it but despite the Jews having these covenants of promises they were separated from God at that time Jews hated Gentiles and Gentiles hated Jews because the Jews considered themselves to be superior to the Gentiles because they were God's chosen people and they were the ones who had the covenants of promise listen to how deceased theologian William Barclay a Scottish theologian who is dead now but he writes some insightful words about how Jews viewed and treated Gentiles listen to what he writes the Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile the Gentile said the Jews were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell God they said loves only Israel of all the nations that he made it was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world until Christ came Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews the barrier between them was absolute if a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death that is hostility but as hostile as that is there's another hostility in this passage that is easy to overlook that is even greater than this hostility and that greater hostility existed between God and Adam's fallen race which included Jews and Gentiles because of the fall Jews and Gentiles alike were enemies of God and they were the objects of his wrath and they were living in hostility towards God although Paul indicates in verse 12 that the

[22 : 08] Jews had the covenants of promise referring to the covenants they had under Moses there's an earlier covenant that God made with Abraham and we find this in Genesis chapter 12 when Abraham was still called Abram when God called him and listen to the words that God speaks to him in this commencement of a covenant that he's going to make with Abraham he says these words to him there was no Jew at this time this was just Abraham fresh from worshipping the moon and God calls him and this is what God says to him I will make Genesis chapter 12 beginning in verse 2 I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you

I will curse and notice this part and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed now God began that with the nation of Israel but he had no intention to only confine it to the nation of Israel even before there was a nation of Israel he said to Abraham I'm going to bless the whole world through you all the families of the earth are going to be blessed through you and God fulfilled this promise to Abraham through Jesus Christ who descended from Abraham and from the Jews but it's important to see the point that Paul is making in verses 11 and 12 his point simply is that both Jews and Gentiles were separated from God and they were separated from one another it was no advantage to the Jews that they had the law and the covenants they were still separated from God they were still far away from

God well they were near but still far the Gentiles were even further but they were both separated from God they were both separated from one another but God changed it it could have remained that way but God changed it and what God did in changing it is summarized in the second word which is reconciliation and Paul explains this reconciliation in verses 13 to 18 having addressed the separation between Jews and Gentiles from God and from one another in verses 11 and 12 he now goes on to explain this reconciliation to God and to one another in verses 13 to 18 so let's look again at what he says but now in Christ

Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ for he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross thereby killing the hostility and he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near for through him we both have access in one spirit to the father Paul's point is that Jesus Christ has brought about a peaceful reconciliation through his blood and by reference to his blood he's pointing to his death on the cross notice in these six verses that Paul uses the word peace four times he tells us that Jesus brought peace in two ways by reconciling Jews and Gentiles and then by reconciling both to God really the order is different he first reconciles both to God then he reconciles them to one another Paul tells us in verse 14 that Jesus made Jews and Gentiles one by breaking down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility between them by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new man making peace in place of the two notice where the oneness is notice where the oneness takes place the oneness takes place in Christ himself and these verses

[27 : 22] Paul is drawing upon his knowledge of the temple that was the temple of the Jews in Jerusalem the temple that was built by Herod the Great historians tell us that it was constructed with a wall all around the temple a wall that was six almost six feet thick and the wall had one singular purpose and that was to keep the Gentiles out and historians tell us that on the wall at intervals there were warnings in both Greek and in Latin that read no foreigner should go within the sanctuary there's an interesting account that you may want to look at on your own in Acts 21 Acts 21 records how Paul was arrested on the charge that he had brought a Gentile into the sanctuary so this that Paul is writing about this was still a reality in his day the temple was still standing and that wall was still there and they were still abiding by it not Paul but the

Jewish rulers and those who followed Judaism and they were still keeping Gentiles out of the temple and that wall was there and they thought that Paul had brought a non-Jew into the temple and they said that he had defiled the temple he defiled the temple by bringing this Gentile into the temple area but Paul's point is not that he is literally referring to this wall obviously he's not referring to the wall because he's saying that Christ has removed this wall but that wall was still standing that physical wall was still there it was still keeping the Gentiles out Paul was pointing to something else he was pointing to the barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles separated the Jews and the Gentiles from one another and also from God let's look at how he is making this point in verse 15

Paul says that Jesus brought reconciliation by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances now what is he saying exactly Jesus himself said about abolishing the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 5:17 this is what Jesus says do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them so we know that Paul is not contradicting the words of Jesus Jesus is not talking about the Ten Commandments he's not saying that he has come to fulfill the Ten Commandments the Ten Commandments didn't need any fulfillment but Jesus was clearly referring to the ceremonial laws all the washings and the animal sacrifices and the rituals that all pointed to him and Jesus came and he fulfilled all of those because they pointed to him and in that sense they were done away with in that sense they were abolished and that's what Paul is referring to he's not talking about the moral law of God the Ten Commandments because they needed no fulfillment and they certainly were not abolished because they are reaffirmed in the New Testament whereas the ceremonial laws were not affirmed and it was really these ceremonial laws that separated Jews and Gentiles in a very visible way Jews and Gentiles were not separated by the fact that for example murder for example they were not separated on adultery that Jews would not commit adultery and Gentiles would no it wasn't that it wasn't the moral law it was the ceremonial laws that the Jews would go through these rituals and bring their animals to the temple and in washing before they eat and following all the jodentittles of the law and even some that they had added to it that the Gentiles didn't follow that's what separated them and what Paul is saying is that Jesus came and he abolished all of that by fulfilling it he removed it and so now there's no distinction there's no separation between Jews and Gentiles that's what this abolishment or this fulfillment refers to and this is the witness of the New Testament that in Christ there's no distinction or separation between Jews and Gentiles Jesus removed the separation by fulfilling those ceremonial laws that separated Jews and Gentiles in verse 16 Paul says that he killed the hostility between Jews and Gentiles how did he do that he did it by reconciling them to God in one body through the cross this is the shorthand for the gospel this is what the gospel does the gospel kills the hostility between people hostilities that separate them now Paul is not saying that because of the death of Jesus on the cross all people all people all the Jews and all the Gentiles are now one and reconciled together no it is only the redeemed community it is only those believing Jews and those believing

[33 : 25] Gentiles who are now reconciled to one another the hostility having been killed because they've been reconciled to God that's the way the hostility was killed brothers and sisters that's the way all divisions between people are killed whether it is the division of race or nationality or ethnicity or social status or economic status whatever it is it is killed through the gospel that transforms the lives of people and reconciles them to God and so that those differences don't matter anymore because they are one in Christ and they are one in his body Jews and Gentiles and other people with their differences outside of

Christ they continue to live with their differences and with their divisions and so when you think about it this is the wonder of the gospel the wonder of the gospel is that when we come to Christ we don't lose our distinctions whatever your race is when you come to Christ you remain that race whatever your nationality is when you come to Christ you remain that nationality whatever your social or economic standing is when you come to Christ you retain that but the beauty is in Christ that's neither here nor there in Christ those things don't divide us in Christ we don't celebrate those things we celebrate Christ Christ is the one who is able to kill those hostilities that exist in the world but they are of no moment in his church listen now Paul explains this in Galatians chapter 3 verses 27 through 29 he writes for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek there is neither slave nor free there is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ

Jesus and if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring notice that if you are Christ's you're Abraham's offspring not if you were born and you can trace your lineage back to Abraham it is if you are Christ you are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise and so the point is that we don't lose our distinctions the point is that our distinctions are of no value in Christ and in the church notice what Paul says in verse 17 speaking about Jesus he says and he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near and brothers this is I pray that we see that in the preaching of the gospel it is Jesus who is preaching it was Jesus I mean they would have said to Paul no I don't know that Jesus came and preached to me as a

Gentile but in the proclamation of the gospel it is Jesus who is preaching to Jews who were near to God but still away from God and Gentiles who were far from God the gospel is preached to all and is reminded that God saves Jews and Gentiles in the same way and there is no special salvation for Jews outside of Christ in verse 18 Paul tells us that it is through him for through him we both have access in one spirit to the father and this brothers and sisters is as a result of Christ's saving work that people who were formally separated from God formally separated from one another they can now be reconciled to God and to one another in Christ so that through Christ they can all have access in one spirit to the father and notice there are references throughout this passage of the triune

God working to bring this reconciliation to pass and this is one example for through him Jesus we have access in one spirit God the spirit to the father God the father that's the result of Christ's peaceful reconciliation between God and man and man and man this brothers and sisters is God's new community that he is redeemed by the blood of Jesus I think it's so important for us this morning to not miss the relevant application of this passage to us as God's people today let us not lose sight of what this should be saying to us because of all the mentions of Jews and Gentiles we are a diverse congregation though small a very diverse congregation but our diversity should never divide us we are one in Christ may we never make much of our race may we never make much of our nationality or our education or our wealth or our economic status or our social standing or any distinctive that we have but instead may we make much of Christ to whom we belong and through whom we are reconciled in one body with brothers and sisters and those distinctions they may make much of them in the world but let us not make much of them in God's church let us make much of Christ who unites us and who gives us our value as his brothers who he's not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters but God is our father that is what unites us that is what we should seek to make much of and this is a foundational doctrine of the church that divisions and barriers that may exist in the world they are removed in

[40 : 35] Christ and therefore should not exist in the church brothers and sisters our differences mean nothing in Christ that the world make much of them but may we not do so may we be God's new community taken out of the world and different from the world the third and final word that describes what God has done in reconciling people to God what Christ has done in reconciling people to God is the word habitation God's new community is now a holy habitation for God by the spirit Paul makes his point in verses 19 to 22 look again at how he says it so then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and 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 also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the spirit Paul is reminding the Ephesians who are Gentiles that they are no longer separated from God and the people of God but that they are now fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household look at those different descriptions that Paul uses to refer to God's corporate people together fellow citizens that we are part of the kingdom of God and saints being a part of the church of

God and members of God's household likening God's church to a house a household and he says that we are being built together on the foundation of the apostles and prophets and this is a somewhat technical reference here and a lot of ink has been spilled on what it actually means apostles and prophets and there are some hints about it that apostles and prophets really refer to New Testament apostles and prophets who existed at the time and who were part of the revelation that God brought to the church this body of doctrine and scripture that we have received from Jesus Christ and so Christ being the cornerstone and these apostles and prophets being those who received their ministries from him received the body of instruction from him and the church is built on that so what the church is built on is already a fixed foundation there's nothing new to be added to there's no new revelation to be added to there are no other apostles or prophets to be added to that foundation that foundation is laid and it is set and the whole idea of Christ being the cornerstone when foundations are built with the cornerstone the first thing that is established is the cornerstone because the cornerstone will determine the alignment of the rest of the foundation and indeed how the building is going to go up and so

Christ being the cornerstone and these servants of his these apostles and prophets that he used to be the foundation for his church taking the body of teaching that he transmitted to them and giving it

to his people the church now is being built on that nobody's being added to that no additional revelation is coming to that that is already fixed the church is being built on that and notice what we see in this passage as the ultimate picture of what God is building in verse 21 these people who were formally separated from one another and formally separated from God they are now being built into a holy temple a dwelling place for God by the spirit that's God's new community that's his kingdom that's his household that's his temple where God's habitation

Jews and Gentiles alike who have put their trust in Christ so how can Ukrainian and Russian believers remain united and continue to worship in the same congregation in the midst of war between their respective countries how can people in this church and other churches around the world be united in love for Christ and one another and be involved together in the work of the Great Commission despite their many differences of race and nationality and ethnicity and economic status and social status and the myriad of other differences that divide people in the world brothers and sisters the answer to all these questions is the same it is that Jesus Christ has reconciled us all both to

[46 : 51] God and to one another in one body that is being built into a holy habitation into a temple for God he didn't only remove the divisions between Jews and Gentiles he removed all the divisions from among all of his people and this brothers and sisters is the wonder of the gospel this is what God did through Christ on the cross and by the grace of God let us grow in the wonder of the gospel and may we increasingly be marked by it until that great day when we all stand before our triune God with all the redeemed community from every nation and tribe and people and language as united people of

God purchased by the blood of the Lamb God this is God's new community we will eternally be that new community in heaven and we get to practice it now we get to practice being what we will eternally be in heaven evidently the languages and the tribes and the tongues John recognized them in the vision that he saw he saw the distinctions but they were the people of God his temple his holy temple so brothers and sisters let us make much of what Christ made much of and that is his redeemed church let's pray together Lord we pray this morning that you would help us to see and embrace the wonder of the gospel that sinners who were separated from you and one another hostile to you and hostile to one another have now been joined together in one body through Christ and his finished work on the cross oh Lord would you help us to live out the beauty of that reconciliation and may we truly be a habitation for God by the spirit we ask these things now in Christ's name amen