# We Are All Aliens; Racism

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Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0:00] Well, thank you, Daniel. Thank you, Jin Zee and Yanyun. Thank you so much for sharing your experience of what it's like to be a newcomer to Canada and testifying to the joys and the challenges that you've experienced as a new Canadians.

Pointing us most of all to the treasures that we have in belonging to Jesus Christ. Thank you for that. I'm so grateful that you're part of our family. Well, my name is Jeremy Graham, and I have the terrifying privilege this morning, this evening, and all through every time zone that you might be in right now, wherever you are, of leading us into our topic today, which is race.
And a colleague of mine on staff here at St. John's was driving through some road construction recently. For confidentiality's sake, let's call him Baron. And he made a wrong turn, and he was confronted by an angry road worker.
Well, this staff member has a non-Canadian accent. And when the construction worker heard his accent, he shouted at him, told him to go back to the country where he came from. Race is the most complex, emotionally charged issue today.
It's next to impossible for a white person like me to talk about race. We think racism is what mean people do, that it's just restricted to nasty individual acts.
[1:24] We very much want to see ourselves as racially progressive. But the stories that we're seeing in the news show that it's really not that simple. Because the stress and the insecurity of this global pandemic, seems to be exposing this gaping wound in our Western culture that now appears too big to ignore and too painful to heal.

It's exacerbated by our sense of entitlement and our thinking that we're somehow outside race. And then COVID, it's not impacted all of us equally.
So that those most vulnerable, those that are immune compromised, the elderly, low-income families, ethnic minorities, First Nations communities, some of these Canadians, they're the ones that have been hit the hardest.
And our context here in Vancouver, here in Canada, well, it's very different than America. Yet, we must not allow ourselves to simply dismiss this topic as an American problem.
As we'll see in our Bible passage, it's a human problem. And our Bible text today is Ephesians 2, verses 11 to 22. And we're jumping right into the middle of a conversation that the writer Paul is having with his readers who are Christians in the Greek city of Ephesus.
[2:46] Paul sounds very contemporary. He's talking about alienation and hostility between humanity, but also between humanity and other human groups, racially different groups, but also between humanity and God.

Because prejudice and discrimination is not a new problem. It's an age-old problem that results from our sinful, fallen human condition.
In fact, we've just interrupted Paul almost mid-sentence. He's just reminded the Ephesian Christians of this sinful reality, this former reality for them.
Since, as we're about to see, it's no longer the case now. There's been this massive, massive change. What Paul gives us, then, is a sort of spiritual biography, their real history, told in three stages.
It breaks down nicely into three points for us to follow. First of all, what we once were, in verses 11 and 12. And second, what Jesus Christ has done, in verses 13 to 18.
[3:54] And finally, what we are now in Christ, verses 19 to 22. And Paul places Jesus right at the center of this difficult conversation about racial tensions and deep divisions.

Too often, Jesus is not even part of this conversation at all. But the Christian gospel declares that wherever humanity removes Christ from the center of human flourishing, there is no hope for lasting

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change, either in human hearts or in human systems.
And as we'll see, Jesus came to break down the walls of hostility. He came to preach peace. He came to create unity without making us all the same.
Jesus Christ is the bridge to a new humanity, a new life and a new system. First, then, what we once were.
Well, the Ephesian Christians, they're mostly Greek-speaking, law-abiding members of their Roman culture. And Paul calls them Gentiles, which really just means they're not Jews. But there was this deep hatred in the Roman Empire between Jews and Gentiles.
[5:05] Paul alludes to these tensions when he brings up circumcision in verse 11. You see, Gentiles were suspicious of Jews because they kept to themselves. And they didn't participate in regular city life, things like sacrificing in the temples and going to the Roman baths.

Many Jews also had contempt for their Gentile neighbors. And their rules about how to keep religiously clean meant that they couldn't even share a meal or share friendship with Gentiles.
Did you know that if a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, the community held a funeral for that boy? It was as if he was dead. And you can watch Sidney Poitier in the film, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?
And you'll see that this type of discrimination is not just ancient history. So Jews thought they were better than Gentiles. Gentiles thought they were better than Jews.
But Paul wants to remind these Christians that from a spiritual point of view, before they met Jesus, they were in a desperate predicament. Verse 11 begins, Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, and then jumping to verse 12, he gives them five reminders of how alienated they were from God's point of view.
[6:22] Verse 12, Remember that you were at that time, One, separated from Christ, literally without Christ. Second, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, which means they were estranged or excluded from citizenship or belonging to God's people.

Thirdly, they were strangers to the covenants of promise, excluded from all the blessings of being God's chosen people. Fourth, they had no hope.
It's not like things were going to get better next year. And finally, Paul says, They were without God in the world. The word here is literally atheists.
They were atheists. Paul's saying, You didn't have a clue about what God's doing in the world, despite all your sophisticated Greek religion and your religious rituals. So what's Paul's point here? Is he just a really negative guy? Well, Paul's point is that when it comes to what really matters, when it comes to our spiritual state before God, before the God of the universe, we are all on the same level playing field.
[7:32] There's no white privilege, but there's no Jewish privilege either. You see, your university education, your postal code, a long history of Christians in your family, or even a history of persecution and injustice in your family, none of it changes our need for repentance and salvation by faith in Christ alone.

We must all be brought down to the same level at the foot of the cross. So let's look secondly at what Jesus has done in verses 13 to 18.
Look at verse 13 with me. But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
Far off, brought near. Outsiders have become insiders. Nearness, though, here is, it's more than proximity. It's intimacy. It's belonging instead of alienation.
And it's not at the expense of others. I mean, usually when a group, when the group can finally achieve that wonderful feeling of belonging to the insiders club, it always comes at the expense of others who are now left as outsiders.
[8:49] But not in verse 14. For Jesus himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

See, Christ has made formerly hostile groups into one new united family. So how? How has Christ made this peace?
And Paul breaks it down for us in verses 15 and 16, declaring three of Christ's actions. So Christ makes peace first by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.
And then second, by creating in himself one new man. And third and finally, verse 16, by reconciling, by reconciling us both to God in one body through the cross.

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And I know this is tongue-twisting language. So stay with me here. And we're going to work through just the first two together. And I'll leave the third one for you to work through with a friend another time. So first, abolishing the law.
[9:52] And Paul's referring here to the Jewish ceremonial law, rituals like circumcision and rules about what you can't eat, how to bathe and wash yourself to keep religiously clean. And it's incredibly difficult for outsiders to break into this sort of tradition.

I remember going to a Christian summer camp as a kid. And I didn't know anyone there. I didn't know the camp theme song. I didn't know the name of all the spots around camp.
I didn't even have enough money to buy the cool camp t-shirt. And I felt incredibly lonely that week, even though I was surrounded by people. They talked about Jesus all week, but I did not feel his presence there.
God says that in Jesus' death on the cross, that it was for the purpose of abolishing any human-made rituals or rules that make some of us feel better about ourselves by keeping others outside.
God has no favorites. And this, friends, is the beautiful thing about faith because no one has a leg up when it comes to trusting.
[11:09] Jesus said, unless you have faith like a little child, you will not enter the kingdom of God. And this is a beautiful, this is beautifully illustrated whenever you see Christians doing the Lord's Supper together.

because at the communion rail, you will have a university PhD standing beside a seven-year-old child and they are united and they come as equals with open hands and they receive by faith the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
That's what Christ has done. Jesus has abolished the law. And secondly then, he's created in himself one man in place of the two.
And what does this mean? Well, one of the most disturbing aspects of historic racism is laws forbidding interracial marriage. South African comedian Trevor Noah, he titled his autobiography Born a Crime.
Because he was born into a biracial family during apartheid South Africa, his very existence was a crime. And what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection is to create a new humanity, a new type of society one that is birthed in a sense, birthed out of Christ's perfect sacrifice, which heals the alienation between God and humanity.
[12:30] And one which is also mirrors the perfect unity and fellowship that Jesus has with his Father and with the Holy Spirit. And here's what Jesus has not done, okay?

It's not like redrawing political maps and saying, okay, now these two ethnic groups are part of the same country. Just learn to get along. We've seen in history how unhelpful that can be.
And it's not like taking four lumps of Play-Doh of different colors and smooshing them together until you have one big brown blob of Play-Doh. Because race and language and culture, they all still matter to Christ.
God is not calling us to renounce what makes us unique. Because race and ethnicity and language, these are all beautiful expressions of being made in God's image.
No, the new humanity instead is offered in Christ as unity without uniformity. Unity without uniformity.
[13:36] unity without uniformity. Unity without uniformity. And I experienced this most tangibly in Jerusalem in 2018 at the Gafcon Anglican Gathering where we ate and we sang and we prayed and we laughed together.

2,000 brothers and sisters from 50 languages and countries around the world. And it was a little taste of heaven. But even the very fact that I call it a taste of heaven reminds us how infrequently we experience this kind of unity that Christ has created.
Let me say two things about this. First of all, we need to remember that unity in Christ does exist. It exists all over the world. And I know that division and hate get way more attention in the media. But unity in Christ is alive and at work by the Holy Spirit in local congregations all over the world. And we ought to celebrate this and point it out wherever we see it.
But secondly, where there is hostility and division, within the church particularly, it ought to grieve us just as it grieves Jesus. Our witness to the world, that is our preaching of peace to those who are far off even as we preach to those who are near, well, that witness is severely damaged by our sins

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in this area.
[15:00] It totally undercuts our integrity. And repentance and change is needed. We must have the humility to ask one another, are there dividing walls of hostility still in our church family that we have put up?

And these are hard questions that need to be asked in every congregation. And it brings us naturally to Paul's third and final point, telling us what we are now in Christ in verses 19 to 22.
So here's where we are in the sermon. Paul began by reminding the Ephesians what they once were and how they were reconciled through the blood of Christ. He then reminded them of what Christ has done, abolishing the laws that ensure hostility between outsiders and insiders, and then creating a new kind of humanity which is like a quilt with this eternal unity that's deeper than anything we'll ever find anywhere else in the world.
And yet we keep our beautiful languages and our cultural diversity nonetheless. And now Paul finishes by describing what we are now in Christ. And once again, Paul likes to teach in threes.
So he gives us three pictures of belonging. First, that we're citizens. You are fellow citizens with the saints. And second, we're a family, members of the household of God.
[16:30] And third, we are a holy temple, a holy temple in the Lord, a dwelling place for God. Well, I think we can relate to the picture of being citizens and the idea of belonging to a family.

But what about this holy temple? I mean, it's not so relatable. It's not really a cozy picture, is it? Unless maybe you're an architect. Yet Paul gives this third image the most attention.
So let's focus on this third image. We are a holy temple. And let me remind you what Paul says. But you are 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. You can go to Jerusalem today and you can see one of the great cornerstones of King Herod's temple.
It's this 12 meter long slab of stone. It's magnificent. And you see, a cornerstone, it holds together the weight and the pressure of two different perpendicular walls.
[17:39] And for Paul, it was the Jews and the Gentiles held together in Christ. For us, it might also be the unity that we seek in a multicultural, multi-generational congregation.

And Jesus Christ is our cornerstone. He's strong enough to bear the weight required for unity. And while the Jewish temple was fixed in just one location, this new holy temple by the Holy Spirit is located within holy people and is therefore an international community spread worldwide.
And in this image, Paul also addresses a common objection to Christianity. An objection that goes something like this. Well, I see that Christianity preaches sin as being a heart issue.
Okay. Jesus fixes hearts. I get it. But what about broken systems? Who's going to fix that? Well, the holy temple is such a helpful image to address this concern because what Paul is describing for us here is a new way of being and also a new way of doing in the world.
You see, Ephesians has six chapters and we're in chapter two and chapters one to three really describe the new life that Jesus brings.
[19:04] But if you read on into chapters four to six, that's where Paul gets practical, where Paul describes the new lifestyle that ought to come for those who are in Christ. Or to put it another way, new hearts lead to new systems.

And the web of implications here is just mind-blowing. So, you're going to be a stone in the holy temple.
Well, what if you're married? If you're married, you will work, therefore, to love your spouse self-sacrificially in the same way that Jesus loves his church.
What if you have parents? Well, you're going to look to honor them. You're going to look where possible to heal broken relationships and you're going to look to care for them as they age even though it's costly.
Are you a boss at work? You'll see the image of God in your employees and you'll treat them as equals and partners in vocation. And we don't even have time to explore Paul's many implications for things like people that are dealing with anger management issues, those who are tempted to cheat on their taxes, those who like to gossip on their lunch break.
[20:17] You see, the web of implications, they begin in Christ and then it extends into this holy temple, the local church, but it doesn't stop there. It impacts every social system that we encounter

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with the power of the Holy Spirit at work through us into the world.

And read Ephesians this week and see for yourself. Brothers and sisters, I found myself listening to Daniel and Yan Yun and Jin Z, listening to their testimonies and just saying, praise God.
They're proclaiming this message of reconciliation and unity that our world so desperately longs for.
So let us remember today that we are all sinners in need of God's grace.
The ground is level at the foot of the cross. And let us grab hold of what Christ has done for us. He's opened up the door to reconciliation with God and with one another.
He's brought peace where there was only hostility. And let us live into our new humanity and who we are now in Christ. Because we are a beautiful home for the Holy Spirit, made up of bricks of every color and story.
[21:33] Held together in a brilliant display of what the human race is meant to be in Christ. Amen.
And now I invite you to join me in a time of singing followed by prayer.

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