

Ephesians: *A New Humanity*
Ephesians 2:11-18

Happy 2023! There is something hopeful about a new year, and I am grateful for Pastor Nathan's excellent message last week that got us going in the right direction. This morning we will return to our journey through Ephesians, picking up with Ephesians 2:11-18. Please stand for the reading of God's Word:

Ephesians 2:11-18: ¹¹ 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— ¹² remember that 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. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) Remembering Our Alienation; 2) But Now...; and 3) A New Humanity.

I. Remembering our Alienation

I stand before you this morning as a man with two working wrists! Look...they both work exactly as they are supposed to! Now...you may be thinking to yourself... "So what? What's the big deal about having two working wrists?" Well, you may find this surprising, but many years ago I was an avid basketball player. Go ahead and laugh...I know it's funny to think of me out there with all the tall people, but it's true...I was a baller. I was the kid who shot 100 free-throws a day out on the driveway in northern Wisconsin, even when it was snowing out. I didn't know I was going to be a hobbit until it was too late! I played A LOT of basketball in junior high, high school, then in pick-up games during college, and especially when I was a student at Princeton Seminary. As a seminary student I literally played every day at lunch, then for a few hours after classes ended, and then again in the evening after dinner. You can ask my wife...I was addicted to basketball and highly competitive. As fate would have it, that all came to a crashing halt in my senior year in seminary. I had the best intramural team on the campus...the team was named "Four Tall Guys and Jim". We were playing the third game of the season when I jumped as high as I could to block a guy's shot. I had blocked this guy before...which was pretty embarrassing for him since I was only 5'5" and he was over 6' tall. But, this time he didn't shoot...he gave me a good ball fake and I went for it. I had a 36" vertical jump back then, so when he leaned into my legs to draw the foul, I flipped right over his back and came crashing down, breaking the navicular bone in my right wrist. As a result of that accident, I had to wear a cast all the way up to my fingertips for three months. That accident happened in 1996, but I still remember what it was like to not have the use of my right hand. Such is why I can still celebrate that today I have two perfectly functioning wrists!

Gratitude is directly associated with our memories. If we fail to remember our past, we will cease to be grateful for our current blessings. Such is why Paul begins this part of his letter by encouraging the Gentile believers in Ephesus to remember what their lives were like prior to knowing Jesus. Paul begins in vs. 11-12, “¹¹ 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—¹² remember that 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.

For those of you who may be new to the faith, remember that a “Gentile” in the Bible simply represents a person who is not of Jewish descent. Here in this section of Ephesians 2, Paul is specifically addressing “Gentile” Christians who were not formerly Jews because their status prior to Christ was particularly difficult, and to some degree, they are likely facing some prejudice from the Jewish Christians in the church.

So, Paul begins by remembering that the Jews had a nickname for the Gentiles which the ESV translates as “the uncircumcision.” The literal translation of the word is actually “foreskin.” I know it may seem awkward to be thinking about circumcision and foreskins at church, but as most of you know, circumcision was a sign of the “set apart” community of Israel, and that particular sign was prescribed by God to Abraham back in Genesis 17. Be that as it may, the Jews took something that was to serve as a sign of God’s election and made it a tool of superiority and exclusion. In fact, Paul equates the Jewish perversion of circumcision with idolatry when he writes, “which is made in the flesh by hands.” That particular word (keiropointos) was commonly used in the Old Testament in reference to idols that were “made by hands” (see Lev. 26:1, 30; Isa. 2:18; 10:11; 19:1; Dan. 5:4).

Church, we all know that as fallen human beings, we can take any good thing, make it an ultimate thing, and then use that thing to exclude others. When I was a pastor in eastern North Carolina many years ago, I played golf with the pastor of a local church there. He was totally convinced and unapologetic about his belief that you were going to hell if you were not baptized in his particular denomination! Such was the experience of the Gentiles before Jesus...they were hated and excluded by the Jews...they were the “uninitiated,” the “uncircumcision,” but that really doesn’t quite capture the animosity between Jews and Gentiles in the first century.

NT scholar William Barclay writes: The Jews had an immense contempt for the Gentile. They said that the Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of Hell; that God loved only Israel of all the nations that He had made; that the best of the serpents crushed, the best of the Gentiles killed. It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile woman in childbirth, for that would be to bring another Gentile into the world. The barrier between Jew and Gentile was absolute. If a Jew married a Gentile, the funeral of that Jew was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was equivalent to death; even to go into a Gentile house rendered a Jew unclean.

Now, to be fair, the Gentiles hated the Jews as well, and particularly in the Greek world where there were only two classes of people: the Greeks and the barbarians. Even Plato himself acknowledged that the non-Greeks were barbarian enemies. Such is why many of the citizens and even the leaders of Israel were quick to assimilate Greek practices so as to not be classified as “barbarians.” I hope you can feel the tension that existed between the ancient Jews and Gentiles. I’m sure that’s hard to imagine since we have no current examples of racial, social, political, or religious divisions in our contemporary society (!). Yes...the Bible understands

alienation between groups of people. The Bible understands hostility between those who are “in” and those who are “out”...or more appropriately, those who are “near” and those who are “far off” as we’ll see here in a minute.

Now, in addition to the name-calling and the prejudice of the Jews towards the Gentiles and vice-versa, Paul goes on to describe five contributing factors to the former alienation of the Gentiles.

First of all, the Gentiles were “separated from Christ”...they had no prophecies and no hope of a coming King who would set things right. The promise of a Messiah came to Israel, but those outside of Israel were ignorant of the coming Anointed One.

Secondly, the Gentiles were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.” God chose to reveal Himself and to bless Israel as a means of eventually blessing all nations through the seed of Abraham. However, prior to Christ, only those within the nation of Israel knew themselves to be blessed and chosen by God. If you were alienated from Israel, you were on the outside looking in.

Third, the Gentiles were “strangers to the covenants of promise.” If you recall, God made promises to Abraham, to Noah, to Moses, and to David. These promises were covenants, and thus the nation of Israel knew themselves to be the beneficiaries of God’s faithfulness to the covenants and promises He had established with their forefathers. The Gentiles knew of no such covenants or promises of God.

Fourth, the Gentiles were a people without hope. For many of us, it is very difficult to even imagine a life without hope, but it is far too common throughout the world. You see, if you don’t know that God loves you; if you don’t know that God is for you; if you don’t know that God has made a promise to send a Savior; if you don’t know that history is moving to a redemptive end and there is a new life that awaits us beyond the grave, then your view of life and history is inevitably hopeless. For example, the ancient Stoics believed that history was cyclical, and that the cycle would repeat itself for several hundreds of years before the earth would burn and history would reboot, with all the same people doing all the same things all over again. Many people live in houses just down the street from you who believe that life is an accident; that there is nothing to live for and nothing to die for; and that when this life ends, that’s it...so what’s the point? Wherever people are without God, they are without hope...unless of course, they simply refuse to think about anything meaningful. NT scholar Dr. Kent Hughes writes, “Those apart from Christ typically wrap their lives around things and refuse to think about ultimate reality. The escape can be very intellectual on one hand, or on the other an eternal Nintendo game.” Hopeless people do whatever they can to distract themselves from their hopelessness, because to look at hopelessness square in the face is to experience ultimate alienation and despair.

The fifth and final factor of the Gentile’s alienation was this observation of Paul: they were “without God in the world.” Keep in mind that the Gentiles had plenty of gods. They had

the Greek gods and the Roman gods and the cultic gods. But Paul knows that there was not one thing REAL about those gods made by human hands. There is only ONE God, the maker of heaven and earth, and before Jesus appeared, they were completely alienated from God...they were spiritually dead, just like all those who remain condemned in their sins.

Church, do you remember your life before Christ? Many of us do, and it is always helpful to stop and remember our former alienation with others and our alienation with God. We need to remember because it keeps us humble and grateful for the grace we have received in Christ, amen? Remembering our life before Jesus also keeps us sensitive and empathetic to the condition of unbelievers that we encounter every day. What Paul just said about the Gentiles before Christ still applies to lost people all over the world...and we would do well to remember how painful and lonely that existence is. Let us never forget that people who are alienated from God will inevitably be those who feel and even promote alienation with others. Wherever you find godless nations, you will find entrenched alienation between people groups. Thankfully, God acted decisively to deliver us from the hostility and hopelessness of alienation when He sent His Son into the world. And that leads us to our second subheading...

II. But Now...

Just as Paul painted a bleak picture of the human condition in Ephesians 2:1-3 and then turned to the gospel with the words “But God...”, so again Paul uses this turning point in vs. 13 to tell the good news of what God accomplished through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, on behalf of the Gentiles.

Paul begins in vss. 13-14, “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...”

All of history is divided into two chapters: before Christ, and after Christ. Before Christ, “long lay the world in sin and error, pining...”. But then Christ came, and everything changed. “Those who were once far off have been brought near.” Paul is quoting Isaiah 57:19 when God promised that one day He would bring “Peace, peace, to the far and to the near.” In Isaiah 56:6-8 God promises that one day He will gather the foreigners as well as the outcasts of Israel, and His house “would be known as a house of prayer for all peoples.” That promise was fulfilled in Jesus!

Notice that the redemption of the Gentiles is ‘in Christ’ and ‘by the blood of Christ.’ That is significant. Jesus is our peace, and it is only when we are in a relationship with Jesus...when we are IN Jesus...that we discover peace with God and, eventually, peace with others. So how does that work? It is accomplished “by the blood of Christ.” How does the blood of Christ make us one, breaking down the wall of hostility? In vss. 15-16, Paul will list three specific ways that the blood of Christ saved us from alienation: “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.”

I'll unpack each of those things in a minute, but first, we must remember “the wall of hostility” that Paul is referring to. In the Jewish Temple during the first century, there was literally a thick wall that separated the Gentiles from entering into the higher courts and eventually into the Temple itself. On this wall were plates that warned the Gentiles that any attempt by “foreigners” to enter into the sacred space of God would be met with a swift execution. In fact, Paul was actually arrested because people mistakenly believed that he had taken a Gentile from Ephesus into the inner courts of the temple. So...when Paul is talking about the wall of hostility, this is a deeply personal and painful reference...and yet Christ did it. He essentially tore down the wall of hostility that separated Jews and Gentiles! So how did He do it?

First, through the blood of Christ on the cross, God abolished the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. Let me expound on this point for just a minute. There are two ways for us to think about “the law of commandments” when we read vs. 15. First of all, we have God’s law...the Ten Commandments...the Moral Law...and then we have the almost infinite number of “ordinances” added to the law by the Jewish leaders, which we will call the Pharisaic law since the Pharisees were the only ones who even attempted to honor those laws. The Pharisaic laws and ordinances included pages upon pages of what you could or could not do on the Sabbath; or foods that you should or should not eat; or ways that you could become unclean; or specific sacrifices that would need to be made for specific sins.

Here in our text we must assume that Paul is referring to both the moral law and the Pharisaic law, but the way that the blood of Christ “abolishes” the law of commandments is quite different. First of all, we should note that the Pharisaic law made the Jews insufferable neighbors. They were so particular about food, cleanliness, the Sabbath, and a thousand other things that they were perceived as exclusionary by their Gentile neighbors. Since both the teaching of Jesus and His sacrificial death set those ordinances aside, we can understand Paul to say that Jesus abolished the man-made ordinances of a religion gone wrong.

However, we should not think that the blood of Christ abolished the Moral Law as we find it revealed in the Ten Commandments. God’s law is true and eternal, and we are called to honor and obey God’s law. Jesus did not set God’s law aside; in fact, Jesus said that He came to fulfill the law as only Jesus could do. The good news, however, is that our salvation is not dependent upon us obeying God’s law. We are no longer estranged from God because of our sin and failure to keep His law...why? Because Jesus satisfied God’s righteous requirement for justice and punishment, and He did so by dying in our place. Thus, our justification through the law was abolished, since we are now justified by the forgiveness of our sins...sins that were atoned for through the blood of Christ, amen? This is the good news of the Gospel...in Christ we have been forgiven...much! And because we have been forgiven through the blood of Christ on the cross, we are saved by grace and we know that we are loved by God! Knowing we are loved and forgiven brings us peace with God, and peace with God provides the means of achieving peace with one another.

The next thing that God accomplished through the blood of His son was a work of creation! Paul writes, “...that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.”

Jesus literally created a new “race”...a new humanity...which is what was needed to accomplish oneness and reconciliation between people who have historically lived in enmity.

Bishop John Reed tells about driving a school bus in Australia that carried whites and aborigines. Tired of all the squabbling, one day far out in the country he pulled over to the side of the road and said to the white boys, “What color are you?” “White.” He told them, “No, you are green. Anyone who rides in my bus is green. Now what color are you?” The white boys replied, “Green.” Then he went to the aborigines and said, “What color are you?” “Black.” “No, you are green. Anyone who rides on my bus is green.” All the aborigines answered that they were green as well. The situation seemed resolved until, several miles down the road, he heard a boy in the back of the bus announce, “All right, light green on this side, dark green on that side.” (Kent Hughes, p 90-91).

The Bishop had the right idea...he needed a new race to break down the hostility between races...he tried to create a common race that was neither white nor black, but he couldn't pull that off. But this is what Paul just said: Jesus created in Himself a new race...a new humanity. Jesus created an entirely new man. As he wrote just a few verses ago, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...”

The New Humanity...the Body of Christ...is not defined by skin color...though we have different colors of skin. We are not defined by our political opinions, though our political opinions often differ as well. We are not defined by our heritage or the language we speak or our financial situation...all of those things are important and there is great diversity in all of these things...yet we are ONE. We are a New Humanity in this: we have been created in Christ Jesus...the old is gone, the new is come...and the NEW is held together IN CHRIST...who reconciled us to God and thus to one another.

That is the third accomplishment of Christ that Paul articulates here in vs. 16, that He might “reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility”. Alienation with God leads to alienation with people. Jesus reconciled us to God through His sacrificial death on the cross, and because we are reconciled to God through the forgiveness of our sins, we are able to reconcile our relationships with others by extending to others the unmerited grace we so freely received in Christ. That's how Oneness is maintained, by the way...when we practice the Gospel

So...as a quick recap: Christ abolished the law and its ordinances, He created a New Humanity, and He reconciled us to God, thereby killing the hostility that breeds alienation. This is the good news of the Gospel for all who believe, amen?

III. A New Humanity

I will close now by briefly touching on our New Humanity. Pastor Greg will pick up here next week and unpack the “so then” part of Paul's thoughts to the Gentiles in vss. 19-22.

In terms of our passage, Paul concludes with these words in vss. 17-18: ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

First, Jesus *accomplished* the creation of a New Humanity...a humanity that would demonstrate peace with God and peace on earth...then He *proclaimed* what He accomplished. If you think about it, almost every post-resurrection appearance recorded in the NT features Jesus saying, “Peace be with you.” Jesus preached peace to the Jews and the Gentiles because Jesus is our peace. And through Him, we both...Jew and Gentile...men and women...children and adults...Chiefs fans and Bills fans...Democrats and Republicans...white people and black people...we all have access in one Spirit to the Father.

I cannot emphasize how important it is for all of us to think deeply about what Paul just said. The Greek word Paul uses here for “access” was regularly employed to describe privileged access to a King. This is what Paul just said: the Gentiles...those who were once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ...so near that they, along with the Jewish believers, now have access to GOD through the Holy Spirit. This access is available for all who believe...period.

Church, herein lies our hope for Oneness. We are all equal at the foot of the cross. We are all those who have sinned and deserve punishment, yet every Christian has been saved by the blood of Christ...all have received unmerited mercy and forgiveness when we called upon the name of Jesus. It is our common love of Jesus that makes us One, and by virtue of what Christ accomplished on our behalf, we are bound in Oneness through the One Spirit through whom we have unrestricted ACCESS to God. Here’s what that means: God hears your prayers in exactly the same way that God hears my prayers or the prayers of the Apostles! The dividing wall of hostility has been broken. There are no layers of holiness...no one is excluded...all who profess Jesus have access.

Please take these things to heart: We are One at the foot of the cross. We are One in the Spirit. We are One in Christ! And here’s the deal: there is no ONENESS to be found anywhere else in the world. Alienation from God means inevitable division and alienation in society. The telltale indicator of the Jesus community...what truly sets that community apart...is the Oneness that is observed amongst those who otherwise have nothing in common. So...let me ask you a question? When the unbelieving world steps into our Church, do they see the New Humanity? Are they taken by the Oneness that Jesus accomplished amidst a diverse gathering of people? Some days I think yes! Some days...particularly during an election year, I’m not so sure! But know this: Christ proclaimed peace to those who are near and those who are far off...and it’s our job to preserve this peace that Jesus died for. That happens when we are in Christ...there is no other way. So, as we begin 2023, let us commit to being IN CHRIST. Let us commit to cultivating our relationship with Jesus through the study of His word, through sharing life in Christian community, through regular prayer and living an obedient life. Let us resist divisions and polarization for the sake of demonstrating our Oneness to a watching and perishing world, amen? And finally, take time to remember...remember your life before Christ, so that we might be grateful for all that Christ has done and so that we might have a heart for the alienated. Let us pray.