

Living As a New Community Because Of the Cross

Ephesians 2:11-22

Introduction

For the last month or so, we have been studying the letter we call, Ephesians. This is a very important letter because it lays out for us many of the purposes which God has for His Church. If you want to understand how to become a healthy, vibrant Christian, and what role the church plays in your life, study this letter. We cannot be a healthy, vibrant Christian without a vital relationship with other believers. This is one reason why we are studying this letter.

I love the way this letter takes us on a journey to help us discover this. To help us grasp God's purpose for the Christian, God takes us on a three chapter expedition of the vital things that Jesus Christ has done for us because of His own life, death, and resurrection. In other words, we see quite clearly that to understand who we are as Christians and to understand the life God wants us to have as His Church, we must look to Christ. All that we are and are invited to become is rooted in Him. He is like the source which feeds the spring of water. He is like the generator which provides the power we need to live. Nothing defines us more than who Jesus Christ is and the accomplishments of His own death and resurrection.

So the Apostle Paul begins the letter by describing for us how we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing. In particular, he describes for us how we were chosen by God to be adopted as His children; how we have been redeemed and forgiven of our sin through Christ's shed blood, and how we have received an inheritance from God which deeply impacts our life here on earth, but is guaranteed in its fullness when we reach heaven as we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. And because of Paul's pastoral heart, he prays that we might have insight into these things during our days here on earth. Our salvation would not mean much if we can't drink of its benefits now.

Then in chapter two the focus changes on what our state truly was, when God found us. We were dead in our sin...we were slaves to the same sin which characterizes the world... and we had nothing to look forward to but the wrath of God's justice upon our sin. That is what we were! Not a very lovely life at all, was it?

But then we are told that because of God's great mercy, even when we were dead, God made us ALIVE together with Christ. God rescued us from our desperate state, and now we have eternal life with Him. This is amazing news, and for those who believe this news, it fills our heart with personal praise and joy for Christ....

But our salvation is not simply what happens to us, individually. It also includes a new community of people that God creates. So in chapter 2, verse 11 Paul turns our attention to how Christ and His death on the cross affects our relationship with one another. When we believed in Jesus Christ, we were transformed as an individual, but our relationships have also been transformed.

Relationships...Sometimes those things which hold the greatest potential for blessing are also the things which are the hardest to obtain. I believe that our relationship with one another is one of those things. I cannot imagine life without relationships. And in recent years I have discovered that our desire for relationship grows out of our being made in the image of the Triune God. God has always existed in relationship, and because He has made us in His image, relationships matter very much to us.

But relationships are also a great challenge, and sometimes, a means of great pain. When we go through a conflict, it is easy to think that it is just not worth the bother to have relationships, especially close relationships. And for many in the world, this is basically how people are living--isolated, scared to pursue any true relationship, and rarely open enough to be vulnerable. But this isolation comes at a high price. Many never realize the growth of character which comes through the input of others nor do they experience the joy of pure friendship or companionship.

But Christ has come to transform our relationships. What we find in chapter 2 verses 11-22 is the foundation for a new kind of community which Christ has come to create. We are a new community because of the cross of Christ. That is what this text is all about.

And in order for us to become this new community, to experience a new way of relating to each other, the text leads us down three different paths. First, it leads us down the path of memory lane and we are told to remember what we have been brought out of. Second, we are led down the path which takes us to the cross. This teaches us what Jesus Christ did in order to create a whole new community. And finally, we are led down the path which helps us see our relationship with one another in light of three things God has made us-a citizen of His kingdom, a member of His family, and a part of a spiritual building in which God dwells. Now we will look at this last section next week because it is so full of meaning in and of, itself.

But today, we will focus on the first part of this text, which lays the foundation for the great work which our Savior, Jesus Christ, has done. So first of all, we are led to memory lane, where we are taught how to see our relationship with one another in light of what we have been brought out of. Let's read verses 11-12.

1.Path #1-Seeing Our Relationships In Light of What We Have Been Brought Out Of vv 11-12

A. What we were-historical perspective

Verses 11-12 help us with both a historical and personal perspective. From a historical perspective, the Gentiles in the church are identified. They are the uncircumcised that Paul addresses. At that time the lines of division in society were often drawn between the Jew and the Gentile. Both groups despised each other. But what our text points out is that even though there was no moral difference between Jew and Gentile, there was a difference in God's dealing with Gentiles as a people. Before Christ came, the Jews were a people with a unique relationship with God, but the Gentiles as a people were cut off from God in these five ways:

1) They were separate from Christ. In other words, they had no messianic hope of a Savior or Deliverer. One common view at that time which grew out of Greek philosophy is that history just kept repeating itself about every 3,000 years. At the end of each cycle the universe was burned up by some means of fate, and then was reborn by the Greek gods to repeat the same futile pattern. The basic idea is that history was leading no where.

2) Second, we are told that the Gentiles were spiritually excluded because they were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." Because the people of the world had rejected God, they forfeited His special blessing, protection, and love which was shown to the Jews as He ruled over them.

3) Third, Gentiles were strangers to the covenants of promise. God had made covenants with His people through Abraham, and Moses, and David. And these are called covenants of promise because God bound Himself to carry out certain promises to His people-promises of land, and multitudes of descendants, and a kingdom, and a King, and redemption from sin, and a unique relationship with God Himself, so that they would know Him and know that He is God. But as Gentiles, we were essentially excluded from all of these.

4-5) So the Apostle Paul concludes, that the world outside the Jewish community had no hope and we were without God in this world. And all this wasn't because God had rejected us, but rather, because we had persisted in rejecting Him. Even when God used Israel to testify to the nations that He is the One, true God, we went on rejecting this testimony. We brought this exclusion upon ourselves.

B. What we were-personal perspective

Now I said that this is both a historical and personal perspective. This was not only the situation for the majority of humanity for thousands of years before Jesus Christ came to earth, but it is the situation for each one of us, before we personally came to faith in our Savior. We could not claim any promise from God's Word because we were alienated from Him. We had no hope and no peace because

we had rejected the very One for whom we had been made. We were dead in our sin as 2:1-3 teaches us.

But God tells us, you have now been made alive together with Christ, so remember what you have been brought out of. Keep calling this to mind.

Why is this so important to our daily lives? Because thinking rightly about our own sin and God's amazing grace positions us to relate to others well.

For example as we go through our day often times something happens that arouses the flesh and the natural self-righteous perspective we have which leads to a hostility toward others. Maybe your co-worker tells you that you are not carrying your share of the work-load or your husband in the heat of the moment tells you that anyone would have known better than to do what you just did. These are the difficult moments of relationships, and yet the defining moments of what we are believing as we go through our day.

It is amazing how this works. When we fail to see our present sin for what it is, either the extent or the sinfulness of our sin before God, and how God is continually holding back what we deserve, then we temporarily lose perspective of what is real, we fail to be truly thankful and grateful for God's abundant grace, and our sin leads to hostility in our heart toward others. But how do we address this hostility? Remember, keep calling to mind the measure of God's grace shown to you and what you have been brought out of. This will lead to a right perspective when the heat is on. This is also how God intends faith to affect the way we think and see. When we believe rightly we think and see rightly.... God's grace toward us is great. But where is that grace found? It is found at the cross of Christ.

2. Path #2-Seeing Our Relationships In Light of the Cross vv 13-18

We are quickly led in these verses from memory lane to the path of the cross, because this is where everything changed for us. Verse 13 leads us to the cross, "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."

A. Christ died in order to reconcile us to God

There are four references to Christ and the cross in these verses. When Christ died on the cross, He first gave Himself as a sacrifice which would pay for our sins and reconcile us to God. This is so crucial, because our sin has offended God so that there is nothing that we can do to reconcile ourselves to Him.

Someone might say, "Now wait a minute. Doesn't God require me to make amends for the wrong that I do? Well, He does call you to repent and to have a change of heart in which you honor Him as God. But this cannot make amends. Here's the problem: Every time we try and make amends for something we do, we go out and do a hundred more things that dishonors Him. This moral dilemma is true for everyone, those who may be church goers and those who are not, those who think they are near to God and those who know they are not. The truth of the gospel tells us that each of us had no way to gain peace with God apart from Christ. And if you think that there is some way that can be reconciled to God by your own works, you do not understand your own sin nor the holiness of God nor the good news about Jesus Christ. The good news is that He **bought** our peace when He died in our place, taking the penalty of our sin upon Himself.

B. Christ also died in order to reconcile us to each other

But the purpose of Christ's death did not end there. He also died in order to reconcile man to man. These verses talk of a dividing wall of hostility. This again is a historical reference to the walls which divided the Gentiles from the Jews in the Temple at Jerusalem. Between the outer court of the

Gentiles and the inner court of the Israelites was a sign which read, "No Gentile may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

Now what we must understand is that even though God did not intend His people to seclude themselves from the rest of the world, but to be a blessing to every family of the earth (Gen.12:3), He did command His people to be distinct. He gave them strict dietary, and clothing, and marriage, and ceremonial laws so that His people would be distinct. He did this so that the world around them would see that they live for the one, true God. He also did this so that His people would not assimilate the beliefs and practices of pagan cultures into their own lives.

But with the coming of Christ, God now gives us His Spirit to regenerate us and to dwell within us and it is His work in our lives which leads to a transformed life. And now God has done away, not with His moral law, but with the laws that Israel used in a wrong way to distinguish themselves outwardly from everyone else. It is these laws which Christ has abolished on the cross. And the purpose of this is to teach us that as we believe in Jesus Christ we become apart of one new body. Everything that would divide us, every distinction which one group of people might boast in, every advantage that one group might have over another, has been destroyed. Because the reality is, before God we equally stand as sinners in desperate need of a Savior. We equally need the grace of God. In this aspect, there is absolutely no distinction between us.

What is important for us to see is that Christ has leveled anything that we might try to boast in, in ourselves. Every one of us must confess that before God I am just as needy as you are. And everything that has been given to us in our salvation is not because of our own doing, but is Christ's doing. Therefore, Jesus Christ alone is the great Mediator not only between God and man, but also between man and man.

C. The new relationship we have with each other

In June of 2001 I visited the country of Bosnia-Herzegovina for the very first time, and I never saw anything like it. Even though this was 51/2 years after the war had ended, as I rode through the country I saw one house after another and one building after another that had been burned or boomed out. And as I talked with people, I heard horrific stories from eye-witnesses of fathers being shot in front of their families and of women being raped by soldiers. For the first time, I personally witnessed the full horrors of what one people can do to another. And it was all because one was identified as a Serb, another as a Croat, and another as a Muslim. I was told by one of the pastors there that this region has experienced civil conflict in every generation for the past ten generations. My heart still aches for a young man named Boro, whose father was shot in front of him by Serb troops. I can't imagine the struggle with hatred that something like this would create.

But here we see the phenomenal power of Christ to reconcile man to man. Even though Boro was a Muslim, he came to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and his own Savior. So did other Muslims, and Croats, and Serbs. As I got to know this church I saw the most amazing thing. I saw people from all of these backgrounds worshiping Jesus together and loving one another with a unity that only Christ is able to produce. I saw this throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Church there is such a wonderful example of the unity that we are called to here.

In Christ, all boasting is done away with. This is true whether we consider our moral status, our ethnic status, our financial status, our family status, or any other status. And because we have nothing to boast in, in light of the cross, all possible hostility has been killed. We can only be astonished at the mercy that has been shown to us. And what God did for us, we now owe to others. We live by God's mercy and grace and so now we meet each other with mercy and grace.

Close/Applications

Let me close by drawing a few applications.

1. First, this text is clearly a call to us as believers in Christ that His work of reconciliation on the cross was intended to destroy the ethnic and racial hostility which we still see in this world. Any prejudice and demeaning attitude which rises out of a perverted view that somehow we are more superior than another person has no place in the church of Jesus Christ. This hostility has been killed at the cross. And like in many ways, I commend you for your example in this.

But my brothers and sisters, as much as the flesh still lives within us it only takes a moment for prejudice to rise up within us. In Galatians 2 we see even the Apostle Peter separating himself from fellowship with Gentile believers when some conservative Jewish Christians came to Antioch, and other believers followed him. But the Apostle Paul rebuked them all, because, as he says, "they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel."

My exhortation is simply this: Let's continue to fight any attitude of self-righteousness which leads us to somehow think that we are any better than another person. This humility which grows out of the gospel leads to a unity which is a powerful witness to the truth of the gospel that every one of us has been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

2. Now second, let me turn our attention to how we are living out our faith in the gospel by the way we relate to one another. Our text draws such a strong connection between these two elements, the cross and our relationships. The moments we are disillusioned in our relationship with another person we tend to turn inward toward our own interests and our own good. But God intends these moments to be an invitation to drink more deeply of Christ, and to know more clearly the great measure of our own need for God's mercy.

When someone sins against us, our flesh so easily takes that sin and inflates it about a hundred times. Somehow, someone else's sin is always so much worse than our own, and the result is, we have a hard time showing mercy. But the cross tells us another story. It tells me that my sin is just as great before God. Oh, it may not be the same sin, but when measuring the extent of sin or the sinfulness of sin, we are all in the same boat before God.

Mom and dad, this is especially important as we deal with the immaturities of our children. And frankly, this is an area that I probably have been tested the most and failed the most. But the patience and mercy we have in correcting our children is the strongest evidence we can give that we get what this text is saying. Are we truly getting the gospel which says, "You and I have been shown infinite mercy by God because Jesus Christ has died in our place?"

3. Third, are we living with the peace of Christ? He has taken away the hostility of God's law, and the law's voice which once condemned you has been silenced. God has silenced it. Do you still hear the condemning voice of God's commands? Don't confuse that voice.

God's law may still correct and convict; this is good for us. But God's law is no longer able to condemn those who repent of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ. Christ is our peace with God. He has brought us near to God, even ones who were once very far away. Now God wants you to feel His pleasure and peace.