

One New Humanity: Reconciled by Christ's Powerful Peace-making Work

Ephesians 2:11-22

June 26, 2016

A priest, a rabbi, and an evangelical pastor decided to see who was the best at his job. So, each one goes out into the woods, finds a bear, and tries to convert it. Later on, they all get together to share how it went. The priest begins: "When I found the bear, I read to him from the catechism and sprinkled him with holy water. Next week is his first communion. The evangelical pastor says, "I found a bear down by the river and I preached to him from God's Word. The bear was so moved by my preaching that he wanted to pray with me and then, he let me baptize him." They both look down at the rabbi, who is lying on a gurney in a full body cast. He says to them, "Looking back, maybe I shouldn't have started with the circumcision."¹

Ephesians 2:11-22 begins by talking about circumcision and then moves into an important teaching regarding the relationship between Gentiles and Jews. Before we jump into Eph. 2:11-22, you'll notice that v. 11 begins with the word "Therefore." So we need to look back at what was happening in the preceding context. We actually dug into this context, Eph. 2:1-10, back in February – 4 months ago! Some of you may not have been here for that sermon so please let me give us a very brief overview.

By the way, all of the messages that we share here on Sundays are available on the church website, www.efcbemidji.org. That's actually how I was able to hear Micah Carpenter's sermon from the Sunday when I was out of town. If you missed it, Micah did a great job preaching about fear from Isaiah 8.

Eph. 2:1-10 is actually one of my favorite passages from the NT. It explains very clearly that as Christ-followers we make up a Grace Community. It urges us to contemplate our humble beginnings before we knew Christ; to reflect on when we followed the ways of this world. This passage also urges us to celebrate the riches of God's grace! It reminds us that we are all saved by grace, through faith.

So, with their salvation in mind, in Eph. 2:11-12, Paul wants them to "Therefore, remember" even more details of their former reality:

They were Gentiles by birth, Uncircumcised, Separate from Christ, Excluded from citizenship in Israel, Foreigners to the covenants of the promise, Without hope, and Without God.

He reminds them of a pretty bleak picture. They couldn't help how they were born. They didn't choose to be born Gentiles. But, then again, God didn't choose the Gentiles; He choose the Jews to be His special covenant people. And they were uncircumcised. Circumcision² was a Jewish practice where they would cut away the male foreskin as a way of identifying themselves as God's chosen people, the Israelites. Every male Jew at 8 days old was required to have this physical sign of the covenant that Israel had made with Jehovah God.

Gen. 17:14 explains: "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." [Circumcision] symbolized an oath. It was like saying, If I am not faithful to the Lord, may the Lord cut off me and my offspring just as I have cut off my foreskin.³ Over time, circumcision became a term of

¹ Adapted from Readers Digest, 07/08 2016, p. 111

² See Genesis 17.

³ *NIV Study Bible*, 2011, p. 38.

exclusivity and separation. Anyone who was not circumcised, like the Gentiles living in Ephesus, was considered cut off from God.⁴

The Ephesian Gentiles were formerly “separate from Christ.” The very term Christ = Messiah (JEWISH!) But the Gentiles weren’t Jewish. Gentiles were separate from the Jewish Messiah w/ no expectation of His Coming Kingdom. The Jews studied the Scriptures and watched for their coming Messiah, but the Gentiles sure didn’t expect anything from Him! The Ephesian Gentiles were “excluded from citizenship in Israel.” The Jews were an exclusive group by God’s predestined plan. Paul talks about them in Rom. 9:4-5, “the people of Israel... theirs [is] the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah....” The Ephesian Gentiles were excluded from these things. They weren’t in the club!

The Ephesian Gentiles were “foreigners to the covenants of the promise.” God made covenants with Israel but not with the foreign nations. God made a promise to Abraham, but Abraham was a Jew. The Ephesian Gentiles were “w/o hope.” They had no anchor or spiritual foundation on which to stand. They were “w/o God in the world.” So, in one way or another they were heathens, godless pagans, or holding onto to false gods and empty religions. In their former situation, the Ephesians Gentiles look pretty Godforsaken. It’s a pretty bleak picture. These Gentiles were at a huge disadvantage. They were not included and held no claim to the many amazing benefits of being God’s people.

And here is the thing we should understand: If we are Bemidji Gentiles, non-Jews, this also describes our former situation. Formerly, we who are Gentiles by birth were: Separate from Christ, Excluded from citizenship in Israel, Foreigners to the covenants of the promise, Without hope, and Without God. Eph. 2:13 says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

It seems to me that Paul is pointing out just how far away the Gentiles used to be from God so that they will more fully appreciate that they “have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” The implications of Jesus’ love and provision for the Gentiles are made more potent against the backdrop of their former bleak situation. Paul is helping them remember this as a way to create thankfulness in their hearts and to put praise on their lips.

But, I think he is also preparing them to marvel at the truth he lays out in our next section of verses: 14-18. Paul wants us as Gentiles to truly appreciate and embrace the peace and reconciliation that Christ has made between Jews and Gentiles.

Eph. 2:14 says that, “[Christ] Himself is our peace.” Paul uses an intensive personal pronoun, Christ “Himself,” and he’s trying to make us see something very profound. Jesus isn’t just our peacemaker; He is our peace. “Christ not only brings peace and reconciliation; he is this peace or, to put it another way, peace is a person, Jesus Christ.”⁵

Vv. 14-15 tell us what Jesus, our peace, did for us as Jewish/Gentile believers: He made the two groups one. He destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. He set aside in his flesh the law.

The temple in Jerusalem had barriers that marked the limits to just how far Gentiles could go. Passing these limits was a serious offense, ceremonially defiling the area and even justified putting someone to death.⁶ Jesus, our peace, took away this barrier so that both Jews and Gentiles could approach God.

⁴ Consider 1 Sam. 17:26 where David asks, “...Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

⁵ O’Brien, The Letter to the Ephesians, p. 193.

⁶ See Acts 21:28

Jesus also set aside the law: Heb. 10:1, tells us that “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.” The Jewish believers used to view the law as something to hold over the heads of the Gentiles. But now, the law’s standards of perfection were fully met in Christ’s flesh, in His perfect once for all atonement for sin. Thus, the law is set aside as something that no longer divides Jews and Gentiles. Jesus made the two groups one.

Vv. 15-16 tell us the purpose for which Jesus, our peace, did this: To create one new humanity out of the two and to reconcile both Jews and Gentiles to God through the cross. This phrase “out of the two” might be a bit misleading. Keep in mind Paul is talking about “one NEW humanity” that Jesus CREATES in Himself.

God is doing a new thing! So, Paul does not mean here some kind of syncretism. It is not some kind of a compromise where each side gives a little and they meet in the middle: “ok, we Gentiles agree not to eat pork and you Jews agree that we don’t have to get circumcised.” That’s not it; not at all. This is about people from both groups, Jews and Gentiles, becoming Christ-followers who now make up this “one NEW humanity” called the church.

Peter O’Brien says it this way: “...the new community of which these Gentiles have become a part is not simply a development out of Israel. It is a new creation (v. 15), not some kind of amalgam made out of the best elements of Israel and the Gentiles. The resulting new humanity transcends the two old entities...The privileges Gentiles enjoy are based upon but transcend the blessings promised to Israel (vv. 19-22).”⁷

V. 16 goes on to tell us that both Gentiles AND JEWS are reconciled to God through the cross. The Jews are not reconciled to God by having a Jewish lineage, not through circumcision, not through knowing and memorizing the OT law, nor anything else.

We are all reconciled by one body, the physical body of Jesus. And we are all reconciled into one body, the Church, this “one new humanity.”

V. 17 tells us what Jesus came and preached: Peace to you who were far away (Gentiles). Peace to you who were near (Jews). Christ preached peace even to “those who were near” (the Jews). Just like the Gentiles in v. 13, who were once far away, the Jews, would be brought truly near to God by the same blood of Christ. Jews and Gentiles share a common Savior and Lord.

Eph. 2:18 wraps up this section, “For through [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” Through Christ both Jews and Gentiles “have access to the Father by one Spirit.” This is a beautiful Trinitarian verse mentioning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But also note that this verse says something rather startling: both Jews/Gentiles access “the” Father. This definite article highlights that we are in the same family. After thousands of years of hostility and racial divide, Jews and Gentiles end up with the same Heavenly Father for all of eternity.

The wonderful results from the work of Christ in vv. 14-18 are now laid out in our final section, vv. 19-22. Eph. 2:19 proclaims, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” Jews and Gentiles live in the same house. We are “under one roof” as it were. We are also fellow citizens, no longer foreigners or strangers to each other. This is in stark contrast to Eph. 2:12 when the Gentiles were on the outside. Now, they are literally inside the house. The Heavenly Father says to Jews and Gentiles: “Make yourselves at home.”

⁷ O’Brien, p. 184.

This phrase in Eph. 2:19, “fellow citizens with God’s people,” can open up a bit of a can of worms. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Paul makes a subtle shift in his wording here. He goes from referring to the Gentiles in v. 12 who were formerly “excluded from citizenship in Israel” to referring to them in v. 19 as now being “fellow citizens with God’s people.”

The theological questions around how OT Israel and the NT church are connected are complex. It would take a very long and detailed sermon series to tackle this topic. Instead, I’d like to recommend a book to you. Some of you know that our former Sr. Pastor, Fred Martin, has written a book called *American Evangelicals & Modern Israel*. In chapter 5, he works through some key ideas regarding Jesus and the Old Testament. Also, in chapter 6, he talks about how the Old Testament promises to Israel are fulfilled in Christ. I think you’ll find it an interesting and helpful read if you want to know more about these kinds of questions.

For our purposes in this sermon, Paul is not talking about Gentile Christians in Ephesus moving to Israel and becoming citizens. Rather Paul is talking about something much more exciting. He is saying that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles become “fellow citizens.” This is the one new humanity that was created in v. 15.

In Christ, a new household has been built.

And, Eph. 2:20 tells us it’s been, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” Paul is talking here about the preaching and teaching from him and the other apostles and NT prophets. Indeed, the very reason that our church, Efree Bemidji, is going verse by verse through a book of the Bible like Ephesians is that we understand the importance of our faith being built on the foundation of God’s Word. And, the cornerstone of our faith, the chief cornerstone of this foundation, is none other than Jesus Himself!

Eph. 2:21 teaches us something amazing: “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” Back in v. 14, Jesus destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. But, He didn’t just gain Gentiles access to the physical temple. Rather, Christ made it so that Jews/Gentiles now become a temple, together! Can you feel the incredible richness and depth of this reconciliation? They are “joined together and [rise] to become a holy temple in the Lord.” God is building His church; it’s designed to be a place where He lives by His Spirit. In Christ, it is available to believing Jews; it is available to believing Gentiles; it is a holy temple in the Lord.

Eph. 2:22 wraps up our passage telling us, “And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” This verb tense, “Being built,” reminds us that this is actively happening even now, today in Bemidji. Praise God that we can be part of God’s household! This verse also points out that we are being built TOGETHER. This is happening corporately. It’s a household, not a private apartment. Church is about community, not individualism. One person cannot be the whole building. The body of Christ is combined of all Christ-followers TOGETHER.

Heb. 10:24-25, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Those of us Gentiles living here in Bemidji used to be foreigners to God’s promise. But we rejoice that Christ is our peace and that He has made us members of God’s household. We are part of the One New Humanity that was created in Christ Jesus. We are so wonderfully blessed to be part of the Church!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 26, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.