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Sermon

He Himself is Our Peace

Ephesians 2:11-22

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Last week, Peter took you into the first part of Chapter 2 of Ephesians. There the Paul wrote about sin separating mankind from God. That separation results in death. It is only logical - when God is the source of life itself, if you cut yourself off from the source of life, the result is death.

That is not the end of the story: Do you remember those vital words: “**But God...**”

Ephesians 2:4-5 BUT because of his great love for us, GOD, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.

God dealt with the problem of sin and judgement by carrying it himself in Christ on the cross, dying with it and then raising us with him to life.

If, last week, the focus was on alienation from God because of sin, this week it is alienation between Jew and Gentile.

God had called a man to obey him. God made a covenant with him. That man was Abraham, and God's promise to him was to bless him so that he and his offspring would be a blessing to all peoples of the world. The covenant had a sign which was circumcision.

From Abraham came the Hebrew nation and from the Hebrew nation came the Messiah – the anointed One who is our Saviour.

It had been necessary for the Hebrews to keep their heritage unspoilt, undiluted – to protect themselves against being overwhelmed by the other nations around them and their religions which did not carry the true revelation of Yahweh.

By the first century, this separation had hardened into a despising of Jew by non-Jew and in return Gentile by Jew. “Gentile” is a Jewish term for any people group who do not have a covenant with the one true God.

This alienation between Jew and Gentile is a major problem when both respond to Jesus as the Anointed One – how can they relate?

Paul wrote to Christians in the area of Ephesus who were mainly Gentile converts. He told them to remember where they have come from. They (and we) were gentiles, the uncircumcised – that is not in the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Paul says we were without God – the word is *a-theos* from which we get atheist. It doesn't mean believing there is no god, but not having a relationship with God.

Before we came to Christ for salvation we did not have Christ, we had no citizenship with God's kingdom, no covenant with God, no future and therefore no hope. The only thing we had to look forward to was the grave. That's pretty grim! It is grim because the situation is truly hopeless and meaningless. However, do you remember Peter said there were two important words last week? "But God..." Well once again, having reminded us of the hopeless state we were in, Paul writes, "But Christ ..."

Look at verse 13:

BUT now in CHRIST Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace...

Jesus has reached out to us who really were far away and brought us near. How did he do it? Through his blood! As we heard in the previous section, sin is that which separates us from God. Sin needs to be taken seriously, even God cannot just ignore it. He must atone for it. The price set in the creation of the universe is death. And Jesus paid that price on our behalf. Why talk of blood? Because the Bible tells us that the life is in the blood. When blood is poured out, the life goes. Jesus blood speaks of his death – the innocent dying for the guilty.

When Paul speaks of our being included into Christ, into his body which is the Church. When there are both Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers then the two are included into one body. So the two cannot logically be divided anymore. As long as they are trusting in Christ for salvation and walking in obedience to him, then they are both in the same relationship to God and then there can be peace between them.

Paul is obviously thinking of several Old Testament passages which speak of the Messiah bringing or being peace:

Isaiah 57:19 Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD.

Micah 5:5 And he will be their peace.

Isaiah 9:6 And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Zechariah 9:10 He will proclaim peace to the nations (gentiles).

Paul then uses a strange expression: Verse 14:

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed **the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility**, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.*

What is this dividing wall of hostility? The answer is illuminating! The Jewish temple was arranged as a series of courts with only certain classes of people allowed into each court. At the centre was the Holy of Holies, which could only be entered by the High Priest. Before it was the Holy Place, and they were both inside the Court of the Priests - where only priests could go.

Outside this was the Court of the Israelites, with entry only for Jewish men. Then came the court of the women and outside that was the Court of the Gentiles. If a Gentile wanted to approach the centre of worship of God, he could only go into the Court of the Gentiles. It was this area which Jesus cleansed because the money changers and marketeers were taking away the space reserved for the Gentiles to worship. You see why he said,

"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."¹

Now the area for the Gentiles was bounded by a Balustrade 3 cubits or 4.5 feet high. This was the Dividing Wall which kept them from going further in. All along it, there were notices in Greek and Latin warning people:

"No outsider shall enter the protective enclosure around the sanctuary. And whoever is caught will only have himself to blame for the ensuing death."

Do you see Paul was using this physical reality which separated Jews and gentiles as an illustration of the greater separation between them? Now this barrier had not been commanded by God in the scriptures. It was an extra provision of the Jews to guard against a gentile going too far. They still knew gentiles had to be

¹ Mark 11:17

able to approach God, but you couldn't let them go too far. It was the same thinking that led them to put what they called a fence around the Law, so one wouldn't stumble into trespass. A bit like a safety fence inside an electric fence.

So how does this apply to gentiles who are not physically in the temple courts? Paul likens the balustrade to the "the law of commandments with decrees." It is the Jewish Law as the means of relating to God which kept gentiles out, so that barrier was demolished. That doesn't mean there is no law at all. The Sacrificial system was fulfilled and completed in Christ and is finished. The Old Testament moral law still stands but not as a means of earning salvation. We should notice Paul refers to "the Law with decrees." That word 'decree' is always used of human rules rather than divine commandments. So it appears Paul is particularly thinking of the extra rules the Pharisees created as a fence around the Torah.

There are two hostilities mentioned here: the hostility between Jew and gentile and that between God and man. Christ dealt with them both as we have seen.

I said at the beginning that problem being addressed was alienation. My great aunt was an alien! Yes, she lived in America with a Swedish passport and the Americans quaintly call such people, 'resident aliens'. It makes you think of ET or Mork and Mindy doesn't it? But alien really means a foreigner.

So having explained that Jesus has dealt with the hostility and brought peace making the two one, Paul can say: (v19)

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household ...

That is the equivalent of my great aunt being granted American citizenship. She would no longer have been an alien but a citizen.

Can you imagine how shocking it was for a Jewish Pharisee to say that gentile were fellow citizens? In former times, he would have had a bath if he accidentally touched a gentile; now he can say to us, you are members of God's household!

Do you think of yourself as a member of God's household? If you are in Christ that is what you are. You belong, you have a place.

²⁰ ... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Now that household has form and structure – it is built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone.

When this building was built a lot of work went into the foundations. From memory, the earthworks cost about ¼ million. Deep holes were dug, reinforcing steel was placed in them and concrete was poured in. The foundations had to be strong to support the building not just so it could stand up but so it can survive an earthquake. You build the foundations and leave them be. Then you build on top of them. So it is with the Church. The foundations are the apostles and the prophets – it is their teaching, their knowledge of Christ and his ways which formed the foundation for the Church – that cannot be changed. Those teachings are written in the New Testament and we are not free to alter them. They are foundational. Above all, Christ is the cornerstone – that part of the foundation which sets the alignment of the building and we must be aligned to him.

As Paul writes he is changing the metaphor from household to building. Jesus had taught that the Jewish Temple would not last but that he was the new Temple of God. So if God was no longer to dwell in the Temple in Jerusalem and Christ was not available physically on earth where would God's temple be? Paul says the corporate church, the Body of Christ is the new temple which God inhabits by his Spirit. If you are in Christ you are being built into a Holy Temple with other Christians.

Finally, it is the blood of Christ on the cross which brought unity, however, it also brought separation. Whereas it brings together those who own Christ as their saviour, it brings a separation from those whose loyalty lies

elsewhere. We become as Peter says, “a holy nation, a peculiar people” set aside for God and that does not always go down well with those who are not in Christ.