

The Two Made One

Devotional Reading: Romans 9:14-24
Background Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two,

thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, 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.

Key Text

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. —Ephesians 2:21-22

Introduction

A. One Family, All Different

Are you more “like” or more “unlike” other members of your family? For family members who are genetically related, we can be very “like” in physical characteristics. But even there, our similarities highlight our differences—and we all have differences because we are individuals. (Disclaimer: identical twins offer certain exceptions!)

How we handle our differences in values, economic status, etc., can sever family relationships. This is a story as old as humanity. Likewise, this is a story as broad as humanity. Yet those realities don’t negate the Bible’s teaching that humanity is one large family. The solution for a fractured, divided humanity is found in today’s text.

B. Lesson Context

In about AD 51, a dozen or so years before writing his letter to the Ephesians, Paul participated in a meeting we sometimes call “the Jerusalem Council.” This meeting is described in Acts 15 and Galatians 2. Church leaders convened to resolve a pressing question for the first-century church: *Is it necessary for Gentile men to be circumcised in order for them to be considered Christian?* Simply put, the question was whether a person had to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. Was the gateway to the church only to be found in the synagogue?

The Jerusalem Council decided that circumcision was not to be required for Gentiles. However, this decision was not accepted by all. Even a dozen years later, some taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised and otherwise “toe the line” regarding the Law of Moses. Thus, Paul found the need to revisit this issue.

I. Humanity Divided

(Ephesians 2:11-12)

A. By Ritual (v. 11)

11. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 3: Christians and Sacrifice

Lessons 10–14

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify Christ’s purpose and his method for achieving it.
2. Explain the meanings of being “far off” and being “near.”
3. State one way that he or she can live in peace and unity with believers.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. One Family, All Different
- B. Lesson Context

I. Humanity Divided (Ephesians 2:11-12)

- A. By Ritual (v. 11)
- B. By Boundary (v. 12)

II. Humanity United (Ephesians 2:13-22)

- A. By Christ’s Peace (vv. 13-15)
- B. By God’s Spirit (vv. 16-18)
Under One Roof
- C. As God’s Family (v. 19)
- D. To Be God’s Temple (vv. 20-22)

Conclusion

- A. Working at Being a Family
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Paul wasn't shy about surfacing the primary division of humanity of his day: there were Jews, and there was everyone else—Gentiles. The ancient Greek word translated *Gentiles* is also translated “nations” (examples: Matthew 24:9, 14; 25:32). The term signified outsiders or foreigners (compare Galatians 2:7). A different word translated “Greeks” is a synonym for “Gentiles” when contrasted with Jews (examples: Acts 18:4; 19:10, 17).

The phrase *by birth* identifies men who had not been circumcised as the sign of inclusion in the covenant. Circumcision was a rite given to Abraham to be practiced as a sign of God's covenant with him and his descendants (Genesis 17). Israel had many practices to express their membership in God's covenant people: laws of clean and unclean, the Sabbath day, etc. But the most obvious was circumcision.

Paul's observation that circumcision was made *by human hands* is not to imply that God had nothing to do with it. Paul knew the biblical affirmations that God had instituted the practice. But there is something more important than that removal of foreskin: the removal of sin. Only God can do that. This kind of removal results in (or should result in) circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:29; Colossians 2:11; compare Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).

B. By Boundary (v. 12)

12. remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

To understand Paul's argument here, we should examine the four ways he describes Gentiles in contrast with the Jewish people. First, the fact that Gentiles are not part of *the citizenship in Israel* means they were excluded historically from being part of the chosen people of God. Thus, Gentiles had no part in *the covenants of the promise* (compare Romans 9:4). The Old Testament tells of several covenants God made with the ancient Israelites (see Exodus 2:24; 24:8; Psalm 89:3; etc.). The promises of these covenants were founded essentially on the same idea: that God would bless the world through

his chosen people (example: Genesis 12:3). This blessing is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16).

Seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of the ancient promises helps us understand Paul's third and fourth descriptions of the Gentiles: *without hope* and being *without God*. There was and is no true hope in any of the pagan religions since none of them worship the only true God, the God of Israel. Without Christ, the Gentiles were cut off from the blessings that God had directed toward and through the Jews.

II. Humanity United
(Ephesians 2:13-22)

A. By Christ's Peace (vv. 13-15)

13. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The fourfold description of Gentiles in verse 12 is now expanded: they *were far away* (compare Acts 2:39). The image is that of people in a distant country. That distance has been negated, for the Gentiles *have been brought near by the blood of Christ*. This phrase refers to the atoning death of Jesus for sin (compare Galatians 3:28; Colossians 1:20). The following explanation is one of the most beautiful and meaningful descriptions of Christ's sacrifice in the Bible.

14a. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one

The Old Testament uses the word translated “peace” as a verb to describe the idea of giving something to make satisfaction for an injustice or wrong. For example, if a valuable animal died through the negligence of a neighbor, the negligent person was required to “make it good” and “make restitution” (Leviticus 24:18, 21); this is a type of righteous recompense.

This Old Testament pattern is a background for Paul's description of Christ's death as the adequate atonement for sin. This is the truth behind the

How to Say It

Pentecost	<i>Pent-ih-kost.</i>
synagogue	<i>sin-uh-gog.</i>

simple assertion that *he himself is our peace*. The marvelous thing is that Christ's death serves not just the Jewish people but Gentiles, too. Everyone needs a Savior (Romans 3:22-23). The problem of sin and its solution through the blood of Jesus transcends any arguments about circumcision or other things that might divide Jew from Gentile.

14b. and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

Paul portrays these facts in memorable language as the breaking down of a *wall*. He may have drawn this image from a wall in the Jerusalem temple, the boundary for Gentiles, and marked the inner courts that were forbidden to them.

15. by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,

As a result, there is no more presumption of enmity, for all are equally loved in Christ. In this light, the Jews' *law with its commands and regulations*, including circumcision requirements, had (or should have) become irrelevant as a divisive factor (compare Colossians 2:14). This does not mean there is no value in that law (Galatians 3:24). Nor does it mean that Christianity is a lawless faith, an ethical free-for-all (Jude 4). It means that specific requirements of the law that resulted in distinguishing Jew from Gentile had become powerless. Christianity is not a religion of rule-keeping but a way of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The result of Christ's work is a *new humanity*, a people of God undivided by anything specific to being a Jew or a Gentile (Galatians 3:28). We are in relationship with one another because of the inclusive nature of our relationship with Christ. As discussed above, Paul sums this up as the result of *making peace*.

Christians of Jewish background were free to continue their observances, as Paul himself often did (Acts 16:3; 20:16; 21:20-26). But such observances must never become a divisive test of Christian faith (Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 2:16-17). Christians from all backgrounds were to live and work together as one, keeping the "unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

B. By God's Spirit (vv. 16-18)

16. and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

To *reconcile* means to repair a broken relationship. Reconciliation has a dual aspect. First, we are reconciled to God *through the cross*. This is another reference to the saving effect of Christ's atoning death for sin (2 Corinthians 5:18; Colossians 1:20, 22). The relationship between God and humans, broken by sin, is restored through Christ, who paid the price for sin on our behalf.

Second, this renewed relationship with God makes reconciliation between people possible, for we are shaped into *one body* in Christ: the church (1 Corinthians 12:27), both on the local, congregational level and the worldwide, universal level. There should be no place for *hostility* between God and humanity or in person-to-person relationships.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you help your church promote unity in Christ?

Digging Deeper

What boundaries should you not cross in doing so?

Under One Roof

Imagine a town where nearly everyone lives under one roof. Welcome to Whittier, Alaska! It's a place where 80 percent of its 280 residents share a zip code and the same address. The main building is a mini-town, having a post office, hospital, general store, indoor pool, police station, the mayor's office, and even a tunnel that goes straight to the local school. The divides seen in larger cities are not there. Levels of wealth do not determine where people live, shop, or go to school—everyone does these things in the same way.

Living in the same building or attending the same church does not automatically lead to peace and unity. Problems still pop up because people differ from one another (Romans 3:10-12; 7:14-15; 1 John 1:8; etc.).

The extraordinary place where real peace and unity can and should exist is in Christ Jesus.

What is only an idea now will be a reality for us in Heaven, where all Christians will be “under one roof.” How should that fact cause you to view Christians of different demographics and cultures in the here and now? —J. M.

17. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

The Jews (*those who were near*) had been, in a sense, closer to God than the Gentiles (*you who were far away*) were because of the covenant relationship. But neither had been reconciled with their Creator. The gospel was (and is) a necessary message for all people, Jew and Gentile (Isaiah 57:19; Romans 1:16). Christ’s coming, his ministry, and his death and resurrection were all acts declaring God’s good, reconciling news. In Christ, God had come near. In Christ, God paid the price of sin. In Christ, God gives life that overcomes death forever. And so in Christ, true *peace* is available between God and every human who desires it.

What Do You Think?

How should the reality of peace with God influence your activities this week?

Digging Deeper

How would you explain to an unbeliever the connection between peace and reconciliation?

18. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

A unifying factor in the church is the gift of the Holy *Spirit*. The presence of God’s Spirit in the church and in the heart of each believer is a great source of unity (see Ephesians 4:3). Just as Paul saw no difference between the Holy Spirit in the life of a Jew and in the life of a Gentile, so we today should understand that every Christian has the same gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39; 10:44-47). He is the timeless, eternal Spirit of God, who was present at creation (Genesis 1:2), was present in the life of Paul as he ministered (Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 2:12), and is still active in the church today.

God had promised the Holy Spirit not just to Israel but to “all flesh” (Joel 2:28-32, quoted by

Peter on Pentecost). With one Spirit living in all the original readers of this letter, they were united by One more powerful and important than anything dividing them. This fact is so vital that Paul will later tell them to keep “the unity of the Spirit” for there is “one Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3-4).

C. As God’s Family (v. 19)

19. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household,

Given all Christ has accomplished, no Christian is to think of any other follower of Jesus as being outside of God’s people. God has “grafted in” the Gentile believers (Romans 11:17-24). They participate equally in the promises to Israel now fulfilled in Christ. They have the full rights, privileges, and obligations as anyone else in *the household* of God. The word *household* draws an analogy to a family as the vital social unit. Every household member had duties but also privileges as all work to benefit each other. To be incorporated into God’s household is to experience the full provision of Christ’s redemption, the Father’s providence, the Spirit’s empowerment, and one another’s service. The doubled stress within the phrase *foreigners and strangers* stresses the “outsider” status of Gentiles in the Jewish “superiority” mindset of Paul’s day and possibly also the “inferiority” mindset of some Gentile believers—a thinking that had to be abandoned.

What Do You Think?

What role can you play in helping your congregation welcome newcomers?

Digging Deeper

How do we overcome things that work against such a welcome?

D. To Be God’s Temple (vv. 20-22)

20. built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

Paul now shifts his comparison of this new people of God from household to one of architecture. The church is a carefully crafted building constructed on *the foundation* of God-ordained teach-

ers. These teachers have been both *apostles*, referring to first-century teachers such as Paul and Peter (compare Revelation 21:14) and *prophets* (compare 1 Peter 1:10-12). Both terms are also mentioned in Luke 11:49; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 3:5; 4:11; 2 Peter 3:2; and Revelation 18:20. Today, we are blessed to find their teachings in the pages of our Bibles. The church's foundation is God's apostolic, prophetic message, fulfilled in Christ.

To bring that point home, Paul calls *Jesus Christ* the *chief cornerstone* of God's temple. We are uncertain whether this word refers to a cornerstone at the base of a building or a capstone at its peak (compare Matthew 21:42, quoting Psalm 118:22-23). But the point is clear: everything depends on Christ, is built on Christ, and has Christ as its focus.



Visual for Lessons 12 & 13. Display this visual as you ask the discussion questions associated with verse 17.

What Do You Think?

What guardrails can you erect to keep you grounded on the proper foundation?

Digging Deeper

How would you know whether you needed an accountability partner for this?

21-22. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Paul's analogy pictures the church as a *temple* under construction. Each person who is added, regardless of identity or background, is like a stone carefully cut to fit with the others. There is every reason to pursue unity and no basis to tolerate hostility among the stones of God's temple.

God had manifested the presence of his Spirit with a great cloud filling Solomon's temple at its dedication (1 Kings 8:10-11). That manifestation defined the temple as the place where Israel could meet with God. Now Christians are filled with God's Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). Collectively, all Christians form the new covenant's temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:16). The task of all Christians in every era is to respect and embrace our fellow "stones" of the temple of the New Testament era as we honor the ultimate stone, Jesus (1 Peter 2:4-6).

Conclusion

A. Working at Being a Family

What a picture Paul gives of Christ's church! We are a global, multiethnic, transcultural, multi-class people, men and women, adults and children, all reconciled by Christ's blood, indwelt by God's Spirit, fulfilling the promise of Israel's temple. We are the household of God, his family, fulfilling his purpose to restore humanity to him as one family.

Being a family takes work. Little wonder, then, that Paul spent half the Ephesian letter, beginning in Ephesians 4:1, instructing Christians to live in unity in a manner worthy of the gospel. We have our own issues that divide us today, and circumcision is not one of them. Even so, Paul's instructions for overcoming a divisive issue of the first century are of great value for us in the twenty-first century.

We see the vision of God's temple. Are we willing with the Spirit's empowerment to live as we must to see it built up and not torn down?

B. Prayer

Lord God, make us courageous and humble to pursue the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace. Help us follow Your will as we help each other build Your family, Your temple. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Followers of Jesus are one in him.