

“Peace on Earth”
Ephesians 2:11-22
February 1, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

The second chapter of Ephesians is all about how God makes things right in this broken world. As we saw last week, the first thing he must do is to restore man’s relationship with God, not an easy task considering the spiritual deadness of humanity. But God has acted in Christ to make alive a portion of fallen humanity. Paul moves this week from the vertical to the horizontal, from talking about the reconciliation of our relationship with God to the reconciliation of our relationships with one another. He is talking about how the universal desire for peace on earth actually comes about.

Peace on earth is indeed a widespread, if not universal desire of humanity. John Lennon wrote a song back in the sixties that became something of an anthem for the antiwar movement. The refrain said simply, “All we are saying is give peace a chance.” Lennon was a great songwriter and entertainer, but, along with many others of his generation, incredibly naïve about how to have peace in relationships. His song seems to suggest that all you need to do is to make a choice for peace instead of violence. But it’s not that simple.

In 1986, there was a peace march that began in Los Angeles, but ended prematurely through bickering and argument. After going about 120 miles, half of the 1200 peace marchers got so fed up with the bickering that they simply left and went home. Those who remained quickly polarized because some were determined to walk and others chose to ride in vehicles. They also fought over the proper dress code for the marchers. They decided to hold an election to decide these kinds of matters, but they couldn’t agree at first on who should be allowed to vote. Finally, they agreed to allow everyone to vote, even the children. They held the election, only to have it declared invalid by one of the factions. Many ended the peace march not speaking to each other.

We shouldn’t be too quick, though, to condemn others for a lack of peace. We have some problems with that among Christians, even good Presbyterians. Years ago I was put on a commission of our presbytery in Maryland that was given the duty of trying to help a church that was in the middle of a split. It was such a serious division that it left members of the same families not speaking to one another. And speaking of families, what church is there that doesn’t experience the lack of peace among some of its marriages. This lack of peace seems to be quite a large problem. Thankfully, our gracious God not only brings peace vertically, between man and God, but also horizontally. Let’s look at what Paul says about God’s way of bringing peace.

I. The Cause of No Peace – v. 11-12

In a word, the problem is alienation. Paul asks the Gentiles to remember that at one time they were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.” They were “strangers to the covenants of promise.” This language of aliens and strangers suggests a division between insiders and outsiders. In Paul’s viewpoint, the Jews were the insiders and the Gentiles were the outsiders. In the time before Christ, God chose Israel to be his holy nation. His intention was that Israel be a light to the Gentiles. The prophet Jonah is typical of Israel’s unwillingness to be such a light. When told to go to Nineveh to proclaim the word of the Lord, he headed in the opposite direction. When he said that he would rather die than go to Nineveh as God’s prophet, God had to send a whale to rescue him and deliver him to his assigned post. Israel acted like Jonah throughout their history. Instead of being a light to the Gentiles, they came to despise the Gentiles.

Paul wants the Gentile Christians to remember their outsider status. He wants them to remember what it feels like not to belong. He wants them to remember this to prepare them for the “But now” of verse 13 that is brought about by Jesus. As we’re going to see in our next point, the situation has been completely altered by the death and resurrection of Jesus. But before we can be prepared for that, we must appreciate the devastating effects of not belonging. Much of our hostility toward one another stems from this aspect of not belonging.

Can you think of a time in your life when you felt the pain of not belonging, of being an outsider? When I first moved to Philadelphia, I met a woman at church who was also from Memphis. In an attempt to be kind to me, she invited me over for dinner one night with her and her son, who was about my age. She also invited another young man who was a good friend of her son. I soon discovered that her son and his friend had a passion for medieval Gregorian chants. I knew almost nothing about Gregorian chants, and spent much of the evening listening to their recordings and discussions of these chants, the whole time feeling very much an outsider. It’s one thing to endure such a sense of alienation for one evening, and quite another to have to endure it day after day. It becomes intolerable, with the result that those feeling it have to address it in some way. It is this attempt to relieve a sense of not belonging that leads to the lack of peace. The Gentiles did not belong to the people of God. But now, all has changed in Christ.

II. The Bringer of Peace – v. 13-18

Verse 13 summarizes how peace is brought so that this insider-outsider distinction no longer applies. **“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were**

far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Jesus ends the insider-outsider distinction by making insiders of all who are in Christ and who are covered by the blood of Jesus. The blood of Christ speaks of the death of Jesus, and the phrase “in Christ Jesus” speaks of our union with Christ. In verses 14-18, Paul simply unpacks the implications of union with Christ and the death of Christ for giving us peace with one another. Union with Christ means that we are joined together with Jesus to the point that we share everything with him. He shares the debt of our sins and we share the benefits of his righteousness.

Paul’s point is that you will never have peace with others until you come to rest in the benefits of our union with Christ. In other words, believing the gospel is the only foundation for lasting peace. Why is that the case? It is the case because peace with God is the foundation for peace with others. Without peace with God, you will use people to get what you want. Insiders won’t feel good about themselves unless there is a group of outsiders over whom they can feel superior. But the gospel says that you don’t need to strive to become an insider because Jesus makes you an insider with God. As Paul said back in the beginning of this letter, we have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. It is when we rest in that that we are freed to begin loving people and stop using people.

Let me give an illustration. In his book on prayer, Tim Keller asks the reader to imagine an eight-year old boy who is playing with his toy truck when it breaks. It is his favorite toy, so he starts crying and brings the truck to his father to fix. His father says, “Don’t worry about the truck. I’ve just received notice that we have a distant relative who has died, and he left you \$100 million.” But the boy keeps crying, because all he really wants is for his truck to be fixed. He has no concept of what it means to have such a large sum of money. We do the same thing when we try to use others to feel better about ourselves. If all we want from them is their approval, or if we look down on people so that we might feel superior to them, then we are just like that boy. We are forgetting the riches we have in Christ and focusing instead on our broken toy truck.

Paul goes on to develop the benefits of union with Christ and the blood of Christ in three ways. These are three ways that Jesus brings peace in our human relationships. First, he ends the hostility, beginning with the hostility between man and God. In his natural state, man is hostile to God. In his holy state, God is hostile to man. Through the shed blood of Jesus, this hostility is ended. The holy wrath of God is satisfied and the extent of God’s love is demonstrated. Man’s hostility to man is also ended through Jesus because the cross makes us all the same. We are all sinners in need of salvation. There is no difference, no superior race, no inferior race. There is only a race of fallen image-bearers who have been purchased out of their slavery by the precious blood of Jesus.

Second, Jesus has “[abolished] the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (2:15). What does it mean to say that Jesus has abolished the law? Clearly, it doesn’t mean that it no longer matters whether or not we keep the moral law of God. Jesus has abolished three things with regard to the law. First, he has abolished the ceremonial law by fulfilling it himself. We are no longer obligated to keep the kind of ceremonial laws that kept people apart: laws like circumcision, ceremonial cleansing or dietary laws. Jesus has fulfilled all those, thus rendering them obsolete. But he has also abolished the penalty of the moral law by keeping the law in our place.

Paul also teaches that Jesus has abolished all rule-keeping as the way to gain God’s approval. In other words, Jesus has become our righteousness. The Bible says that everyone is seeking a form of righteousness. All of us want to feel that things are okay with us. Hostilities between people occur because we know deep in our hearts that everything is not okay with us. So we use and abuse people in the attempt to meet this need of righteousness. The Bible says that Jesus is our righteousness. We no longer need to look to others for this sense of wholeness because we have it in Jesus. The church is the new man in Christ that lives believing this. The reason that racism and all forms of divisiveness are so wrong in the church is that they reveal that Jesus is nothing to us, that we are not believing that he is our righteousness, with the result that we must look to people for such righteousness.

Finally, in our union with Christ Jesus makes one new man out of the two. This refers to the church, which brings us to our third main point.

III. The Community of Peace – v. 19-22

The church is God’s new community of peace. He uses three images for the church: a kingdom, a family and a temple. The church is a kingdom, indicated by the phrase “fellow citizens” instead of “strangers and aliens.” The church is a family, indicated by the word “household.” Families unite and support one another. Our youngest daughter has a show in New York that begins today. Both her brother and her sister have stepped up to help her in significant ways. It brought great joy to my heart to see their support of her, and I texted them to tell them so. It brings joy to the heart of God to see his children loving one another and living in peace with one another.

He spends the greatest amount of time on the third image of the church, that of the temple. The Old Testament temple was where God chose to reveal his glory. He does so now in the church. As he says in verse 22, the church is the “**dwelling place for God by the Spirit.**” Jesus is the cornerstone and the New Testament apostles and prophets are the foundation of this temple. The

New Testament temple will grow until it fills the whole earth, and then there will be the perfect peace that we all desire.

John Lennon had the right idea; he just didn't go far enough. He wanted us to give peace a chance, but he never said how that should happen. Here's what he should have done if he really wanted to promote peace. He should have become a follower of Jesus, and he should have joined himself to a gospel-preaching church. The church today is to show the world what the coming kingdom of peace is like.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with three applications. First, we need to do all we can to make sure that our church is the kingdom of peace God has in mind with the creation of this one new man in Christ. That means that no barrier should be erected in the church other than the barrier Jesus is. There should be no racial barrier, no educational or economic barrier, and no social class barrier.

Second, if you want to work toward peace in this world, you should join this church by placing your trust in Jesus and joining the membership of a church. Some of you have been long-term regular attenders, but have stopped short of becoming a member of the church. I know it's possible to be a genuine Christian without being a church member, but what I don't know is why you would want to do so. There are many today who want to claim to be Christians but who want nothing to do with the church. But we must remember that the church is the family of God and the temple of God. Later, Paul is going to say that the church is the bride of Christ. It is true that every church on earth has some blemishes, and this one is no exception. But it is also true that we are Christ's bride, and he doesn't take kindly to those who criticize his wife. I might be aware of what some of my wife's shortcomings are, but I don't appreciate it when others start criticizing her.

Finally, give yourself to the service of the church, both as an institution and as the temple where Jesus dwells. The church grows as it keeps Jesus as its foundation. Labor to do so, and labor too in the mundane parts of the church. There are some who think that the only church work that has value is the more spiritual kind, and there are others who just want to do the mundane parts. Both are as essential in the church as they are in your household. So labor to disciple others, to evangelize, teach and pray. And labor too to lock and unlock doors, to fold bulletins, to plan events as a way to serve others. We are the kingdom of peace because we are the dwelling place of God.