

Part 4: True Belonging

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Right now a segment of our college ministry is on their way to Southern California for our Summer Leadership Project. I remember distinctly the first year we partnered with our SoCal friends and the culture clash between students from the University of Montana and San Diego State University couldn't be more noticeable.

For instance of our students was a relatively reserved science major from Winnett Montana. Winnett is a town in Eastern Montana with a population of 182. Up until this point, Missoula was the highest population density population he had ever encountered and his campus community consisted of fellow, relatively low-key, wilderness minded students.

I had the joy of seeing Garret arrive on campus for our project. They drove all through the night to come into the densely populated and wildly busy San Diego area, and as he rolled into the apartment complex the van was immediately mobbed by what we called, "the hype committee." This welcome wagon consisted of dudes in neon bro tangs, fresh off their fraternity pledge, riding skateboards down the driveway, holding signs, carrying boom-boxes, laying on the hood of the car, yelling, all while trying not to mess up their hair.

Needless to say, I didn't need to hear Garret say anything. I saw in his eyes very clearly the statement: "I don't belong here."

I'm sure we've all been in contexts where we feel the same way. Maybe it's work functions or family reunions. Maybe even it's church on a Sunday morning. But we all know times where we feel the ache of not belonging and the discomfort that it brings.

In fact one of the more important questions you can ask is: "How do I belong?" And this question really can be asked from two positions. It can be asked as an outsider: "How or what must I do to belong to that group?" Or it can be asked as an insider: "How do I belong here, what is it that identifies me with this group?"

The first question explains our anxiety: "How do I get there?" The second one displays our fear: "How do I stay here?"

I met with a young lady this week who described the season she had been in for the past year where she had encountered sin from others and hostility between friends at the end she said in tears: "I just want a place to belong." Introverts and extroverts. Christian and non-Christian. Montanans and Californians. We all want belonging because we all want peace.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus some two thousand years ago, and even then these desires and fears manifested themselves in tribalism and hostility. But Paul wrote to the church so that he might help them understand not only how the gospel changes our standing before God, but how it changes our relationships with those around us.

Last time we were together we looked at the first half of Ephesians 2 where we saw what Jesus did to restore us to God, and in the latter half of Ephesians 2 today we are going to see what Jesus did to restore us to each other. In other words it is in our restoration to God that we can finally find true belonging with each other and in our world.

This is what we are going to see today in Ephesians 2. In verses 11-12 we are going to see **The Need for True Belonging**. In 13-16 we are going to see **The Means of True Belonging**. And in 17-22 we are going to see **The Fruit of True Belonging**.

Now in Ephesus, and in many of the churches that Paul worked with, there was an underlying problem of racism in the churches. The people of God was once an ethnic people. This was the nation of Israel and it was this nation that the Old Testament focuses on.

God called out to man named Abraham and said, "I am going to make you into a nation, and I will be your God." And he gave this nation specific markers. Their male children were to be circumcised as a sign of their distinction among the nations. God gave them the law which not only told them how their worship was distinct, but how their lives, their clothes and even their houses were to be distinct from the nations.

But once Jesus came, people from other nations began following him. These other nations, these outsiders, were called Gentiles. And now the Gentiles are claiming to also have fellowship with the God of the Jews.

And in many of these early churches, the tension was palpable. The Jewish believers were frustrated that the Gentiles could just walk in and worship their God. And the Gentiles were perhaps self-conscious on one hand that they weren't Jews, and on the other hand they were probably angry at the elitism that the Jewish practiced towards them.

And it is here that we encounter our first point today: **The Need for True Belonging**. In the church Paul knows that there is no place for racial, economic or societal infighting.

And Paul is going to address this need by highlighting the perceived barriers to belonging but then showing them the real barriers to belonging. **Ephesians 2:11**.

Here Paul shows the pettiness of the disagreements in the church. He points out the name calling. You Gentiles who are called, "the uncircumcised" are only called that by those who call themselves "the circumcised."

It might sound weird to you that these are the categories and names they would call each other, but this had long been the case. God's people were always the circumcised and the "others" were always the uncircumcised. It's kind of like how everyone in Missoula loathes Butte. It is "the other."

I once heard someone say if they got in a car crash in Butte that you should carry him out of the city so that he doesn't have to die in Butte. King Saul in the Old Testament fell on his own sword in battle because he couldn't stand the idea of being tormented and killed by those uncircumcised Philistines.

But Paul points out how inconsequential this debate is. Did you notice his repeated words in this text: **Ephesians 2:11**. You Jews call the Gentiles the uncircumcised because they are unchanged in the flesh.

And you Gentiles call the Jews the circumcised because they are changed in the flesh. But both of you seem completely unaware that both of these are only skin deep.

The problem is not in your flesh. The problem is in your heart. We have not only a physical separation but we also have a spiritual separation. Paul identifies the superficial issue but then highlights the spiritual reality behind all of it. **Ephesians 2:11-12.**

And here we see the need for true belonging. We all desire to belong because we were made to belong to God. Now remember Ephesians 2 is split into two parts, the part we looked at last time discussed how Jesus solved our sin and restored us to God, and in this part Paul is showing out Jesus solved our sin and restored us to others.

And what's interesting are the categories and experiences Paul uses to define what it looks like to be in sin and not in Christ. In Ephesians 2:1-10 Paul uses words like "dead," "following," "controlled," to stress the inability and helplessness of those who are in sin. And in our text today Paul stresses the relational problems of sin.

Did you see that? To be in the flesh is to be separated from Christ, strangers from the people of promise, and without hope which is to be without God in this world. This is important because we don't often think of sin in these categories.

When we think of sin, we often describe individual isolated actions instead of total inability. And we think of sin only as the violation of rules or dogma, but we don't see it as actually having a relational impact on ourselves. But here Paul wants us to understand sin by helping us feel its consequence.

Sin damages our relationships with Jesus, for just as we hear heart wrenching stories of children being separated from their families at the border, so our sin separates us from Jesus.

Sin makes it impossible to belong to God's covenant people because it removes you from the blessing of belonging. You might be able to mix about with God's people, but without God's promise being given to you, you will always feel like a stranger or an alien. Out of place even though there are people all around.

And lastly our sin keeps us at arm's length from hope because with sin, we have no access to God.

Now I want to be clear here, Paul is not saying that believers in Jesus never feel separated from Christ, strangers among the gathering of believers, or without hope in the world. But what he is saying in this text is that it is believers who understand how the gospel changes all of these things in ways the world itself cannot.

Because the truth is there are insiders and outsiders when it comes to God's people. By nature, in our flesh as Paul is saying, we do not belong to God. We are relationally separated from him.

This is true for each and every one of us in here today. There is a real gap of belonging that exists in all of us. Each of us will one day stand before God and those who are on the outside of Christ and his people will face judgment. Which is why it is so important to understand what Paul is saying here.

The question we must ask is “How do we belong?” How do outsiders and become insiders? How do those separated, estranged and isolated become anything other than that?

To summarize, on our own, in our flesh we have a crisis of belonging. We feel as outsiders because we really are separated for Jesus, estranged from God’s people, and without God himself. Well now Paul introduces the transformative change of our next point. His next five words are crucial: **Ephesians 2:13 (But now in Christ Jesus)**. The solution to our belonging is to no longer be found, “in the flesh” but to be found, “In Christ Jesus.”

This is the second point today: **The Means of True Belonging**. We have a crisis of belonging and it's Jesus who is going to do something about it. Last time we were here we summarized Paul's clear gospel presentation in the first part of chapter 2 as: "And you...But God." And you were dead, but God is rich in mercy.

We see a similar pattern now in this text don't we: "Remember that you were, But now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near." Now remember Paul is writing to believers here. He isn't leading an evangelistic Bible study. Which means that he knows something that if you are a believer you must know today: We are prone to forget what Jesus has done for us.

And this is so important because in this passage we see Jesus solving all three of the negatives we had above. We just saw that we were separated from Christ, outsiders to God's covenant people, and without God. But in Christ all three of these things change. What we see in this text is that our separation is solved because the blood of Christ brings us near. Our estrangement is fixed because the work of Christ makes a new people. And our isolation is resolved because the work of Christ reconciles us to God.

First, Paul says *the blood of Jesus brings us near*. **Ephesians 2:13**.

In the Old Testament not only were there the tribes of the uncircumcised and the circumcised, the clean and the unclean, but there was also the near and the far. Moses was God's chosen prophet and when God's people were gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai look at the distinction which was there: **Exodus 20:18-21**.

Because of the sin of the people, they stood far off from God, and only God's chosen prophet could draw near. But Jesus is the greater Moses. Jesus came and drew us near with his blood. Our sin leaves us isolated and separated from Christ, but his blood paid for our sin and now it actually draws us near.

Do you understand that Jesus’ blood really counts for you? If you have faith in Jesus Christ you are no longer considered far off by your flesh, but instead you are covered with the blood of Jesus himself. In his blood Jesus has joined himself to you. We are no longer separated.

If you aren’t a believer in here today this is what I want you to hear: true belonging starts with the blood of Jesus. Your sin keeps you apart from God, but Jesus’ blood draws you near. Have you believed in that? Have you looked at Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and received that work? If not please talk to someone in here before you leave today.

Secondly, where we were once strangers to God’s people, *The work of Jesus creates a new people*: **Ephesians 2:14-15**.

Now for most of us, when we look at these three problems of belonging, we very rarely focus on all three aspects. We are prone to look at these verses and we see that we have been brought near to Jesus and reconciled to God, and that is the good news we needed to hear and that's where the relational aspect of the gospel ends.

But that's not where this passage ends, and in fact that's not the point of Paul's message. Paul made that point in verses 1-10. Here in this text Paul is talking about how the relational restoration we have in Jesus creates a new people who live together in a gospel community. The point of this passage is the church. This makes sense because Paul is writing to a church.

You cannot truly belong to God without belonging to God's people, and you cannot truly belong to God's people without belonging to God.

Why is it so easy to understand belonging to Jesus and belonging to God without belonging to his church? Well Paul tells us: hostility. We do not always get along. We do not always see eye to eye. And because of that we often leave the church, go to another church, or drive others out of the church.

But this is where Paul is most practically applying the gospel to this church and to our church. Look back at **Ephesians 2:14-15**.

Jesus made two into one, and made hostility into peace, by fulfilling the law. The law of God was that legal document given to God's ethnic people in the Old Testament that set the standards for spiritual and physical distinction.

In this passage Paul also refers to the law as the dividing wall of hostility. Why does it produce hostility? Because it was followed like this: You Gentiles, if you do not dress like a Jew, eat like a Jew, or worship like a Jew, you do not get the privilege of the God of the Jews.

But there was a problem here. Not even the Jews in their law keeping and circumcision could follow the law well enough to get to God. In Jeremiah 4, God rebukes the Jews and calls for them to circumcise their hearts. Their physical ordinances did nothing to bridge their own spiritual distance between them and God.

But Jesus came and Jesus abolished the law by fulfilling it. This is what Jesus says in **Matthew 5:17**.

Why is this important when it comes to killing hostility and finding true belonging in the people of God? It means that Jesus and Jesus alone kept the outward markings of the law required for salvation. And anyone who has been brought near by his blood, now has the perfect fulfillment of that law applied to them in Jesus Christ.

How can Jews belong to God's covenant? Because Jesus fulfilled the law for them. How can Gentiles belong to God's covenant? Because Jesus fulfilled the law for them.

This is why the early church fathers called Christians "the third race." They are neither Jew nor non-Jew. They are Christians by the blood of Christ. And here is why this is important: if we fail to see that Jesus has fulfilled the law of God, then we will always view our brothers and sisters through the lens of comparison and hostility.

This can manifest itself by saying that you will only find true belonging in a church which acts, lives and looks like you. But the barometer of God's covenant people is the gospel and growth in Christ, not the standards of our own proclivities.

The church should be a place where sociological, financial, and ethnic differences mean so very little. Does the gospel change the way you view those who look different than you but who believe in the same Jesus as you? If not, you may be building up what Christ has torn down.

Jesus unites strangers and aliens in the church through his perfect law fulfilling work. But lastly, where we were once without God *The cross of Jesus reconciles us to God*. Look with me at **Ephesians 2:16**.

Now why is Paul going back to the gospel here? We already saw that the blood of Jesus brings us near, why is Paul turning back to our reconciliation towards God?

Two reasons. The first is that we must see the gospel brings us full and relational acceptance before God. Our reconciliation to God isn't like the reconciliation my kids have after a fight. It is full, willing, intimate and relational restoration. You and your fellow believers belong to God together by the same reconciling work of Jesus.

But this is the second point and the one Paul is really emphasizing here. If Jesus has reconciled the cosmic sin which stood between you and a holy God, then doesn't that give us every ability to remove the hostility that stands between two believers inside the church?

If we have been so mightily reconciled to God, then we have hope for reconciliation to others. Meaning that the church, this new body, is not a place where we will never be wronged, but it ought to be a place where the gospel helps us right wrongs and experience peace. So I want to ask you today: is there someone in your life, in this church, that the gospel is compelling you to seek peace with? If there is I would encourage you to talk to God, and an elder or community group leader about what that might look like to move forward in that.

Would you think about that today?

I mentioned earlier a young lady who told me this week that she desperately wanted a place to belong. And in reflecting on this text with her I said this to her, which I believe is Paul's message to us today: If you have faith in Jesus Christ, you belong to God and with God's people.

What a beautiful message. We belong to God. And even though we are not physically with God right now, Jesus has given us over to life as his church so that we might create a community of shared hope and encouragement right now.

And in the last part of the text today Paul applies this belonging to the life of the church, and this is our last point today: **The Fruit of True Belonging**.

What does a church who understands the relational relief of the gospel look like? Here we find three points of application.

Churches that have been brought near through Jesus become *Churches who preach gospel unity in Christ*.

Look at **Ephesians 2:17-18**. Jesus was the greatest missionary the world has ever seen. We might send someone to the ends of the earth to preach salvation, but Jesus was sent from heaven to earth to preach salvation to us.

It is precisely because Jesus preached peace to us who were near, and to us who were far off that the church is a community dedicated to proclaiming this gospel as broadly as we can. Because everyone who comes to Jesus comes through the same Spirit, we don't get to decide who is worthy of the gospel and who is not.

If someone was made in the image of God, then it is the joyful obligation of the church to do as Jesus did to us and proclaim to them the hostility killing, soul reconciling work of the gospel. Do not neglect to think evangelistically about those who are near to you: your family, your neighbors. But do not neglect to think evangelistically about those who are far off from you in terms of global missions.

Second, churches who are made one in Jesus are *Churches who stress true belonging*. Look with me once more at **Ephesians 2:18-19**. By faith in Jesus we are fellow citizens and members of God's household.

When we belong to God, we belong to his people at a level so wonderfully intimate that it truly binds us to one another. Take for instance my sister. She is a woman, I am a man. She loves Big Dipper, I love Sweet Peaks. She loves bad movies, I like good movies. She likes coffee, I like tea. In all reality there are very few things we share in common, yet when we are together I'm not worried about feeling like we have anything to talk about. Why? Because she is my sister. We are family.

As a church there might be times in your community group or in our Sunday gatherings that you might find yourself talking to someone where you quickly realize you have absolutely nothing in common with them. But in Christ we are family.

And it's because we are family that we can begin to know each other at the level of fellow citizens and members of God's household. True belonging doesn't come as we are able to talk sports together. True belonging comes when we can ask each other: "How is your soul?"

If we are a church unable to ask these kinds of questions to each other, we might find ourselves more hostile towards each other than we think.

And lastly, churches that have been reconciled to God become *Churches who display God's glory*. Look with me at **Ephesians 2:20-22**.

The work of the church is no human labor. We no longer work according to the flesh, but we are being built by the Holy Spirit into a dwelling place for God. Which means this: as a church our greatest joy is that we would together grow in holiness so that God might be more visibly seen in our gathering.

Our ability to grow together up into Christ affords this church the ability to reflect the beautiful God who has saved us. In a world filled with hopelessness, a church growing together reflects the God who brings us hope.

This is the kind of church we want to be as we are growing up into Christ, for the glory of God, and by the work of his Holy Spirit.