

The Reconciling Gospel of Jesus

Jonathan White | Ephesians 2:11-22

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America is a divided place. Political conversations have long had the possibility of getting heated, but 2024 in our western landscape is not looking good. Politics aside, people divide over all kinds of things – like racial and socio-economic differences. Make no mistake, this is not just an American problem. Think of the countless skirmishes and wars that have happened in just about every nation throughout history... think about the caste system in India, or the endless civil wars in Africa and the middle east.

But despite hopes of coexistence on bumper stickers throughout our city, our division runs too deep to be solved by well wishes of surface level peace. Good vibes have no more power to eliminate our division than a squirt gun has the power to defend against an invading army.

When my wife and I were living in another place further southwest in our country, we had a neighbor named Fred we were attempting to share the gospel with. One day outside of our apartment, we caught him coming home from the store and struck up a conversation about his spiritual beliefs.

“Music is my religion!” He declared with boldness. “It is the only thing in the world that crosses borders and unites people of all backgrounds together. It is a universal language, spoken by all... For example...” and then he belted out a familiar tune. “See what I mean?” He confidently questioned. As I was scanning my brain for the most strategic way to respond, I looked next to me only to discover that my lovely wife was wearing her confusion on her face. Despite Fred’s claim, here stood a person who grew up outside of America and had never seen a single film in the Indiana Jones franchise and therefore didn’t speak the language he described as universal.

Contrary to optimistic Missoulians and pagan music teachers, our text today will show us that the only universal truth is that our sin indeed separates us from God and from each other, making us enemies with both. But in spite of this bad news, our main point we’ll consider today is this: **The gospel reconciles sinners to God and to each other.**

We’ll see how it does that in 3 points: **separated from God and each other, reconciled to God and each other**, and finally we’ll look at the fruit of our reconciliation in **growing in Christ together**.

Let’s consider our first point: **separated from God and each other**. Please read verses **11 and 12** with me and watch for Paul’s opening remarks.

“Therefore remember”. Remember what? In order to better understand our passage this morning, I want to zoom way out and start all the way back at creation to see that our problems of separation and division aren’t new in Ephesians but have been there from the start.

In short, God created humanity to live together in the garden, working the ground harmoniously alongside a multiplying humanity, more and more image-bearers increasingly worshipping and reflecting the love of the triune God in a right relationship to him *and* each other, under his good rule.

But our sin messed the whole thing up. The first glimpse of division we see in the Bible is in the very words of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve to doubt God and separate from him in order to pursue their own desires. And ever since the fall, nothing has come more naturally to us than rejecting God's rule and living in opposition to him. And because of our rebellion, **Isaiah 59:2** says "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."

Fast forward to the passage Dave preached on last week, Paul describes all of humanity as dead in our trespasses and sins, following Satan, embracing the passions of our flesh, and were by our very nature, children of wrath. This means we deserve God's just punishment for violating his standard.

In our evangelism, we spend a lot of time (and I think correctly) on how our sin separates us from God. All sin is primarily and firstly against God. Because he created us, he gets the say over how we live. But that means that when we harm another person, it is firstly because of a rejection of God's design and is therefore an action against God. And since none of us are without sin, we are all separated first from God. It's from this muddy spring that our separation from each other flows.

But back to Adam and Eve, think about what happened as soon as they disobeyed God, they were separated not just from him, but from each other, now embarrassed by their sin-distorted view of their bodies. In the very same moment humanity broke relationship with God, our relationships to one another were broken. And ever since, nothing has come more naturally to us than sin that continues to put us at odds with not just God, but each other.

Now back in our text, Paul says – remember, remember not just your separation from God, but consequently, from one another. Remember, at one time you gentiles were separated from Christ, alienated from God's people, strangers to the promises given to them... in what way? In the flesh.

Often in the Bible, our flesh refers to our sin and sinful desires – we'll come back to that. But here in the first part of our passage, the phrase "in the flesh" is tied off to the idea of circumcision to highlight the division between Jews and Gentiles. Biblically speaking, Paul says that circumcision is made in the flesh by hands, because he wants us to see circumcision was never about a physical operation, which is powerless on it's own. But it's about something deeper.

Circumcision was intended to be symbolic of a people who were cut off from the world, set apart as holy, and consecrated to live differently under God's rule, alongside God's covenant people, Israel. One commentator says then that to be called "the uncircumcision" in our passage was to be declared "outside the sphere of God's redemptive favor." And this fits with what our text is after as we see that the gentiles are alienated from the community of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise. What are the covenants of promise? They include - God's covenants with Abraham, Noah, Moses, and with David, as well as a few others. These were Old Testament promises given not to the gentiles, but to God's people, Israel. Why did God give them these covenants and accompanying laws?

A friend of mine often refers to Israel as a fishbowl community. The whole point of the law and covenants given was to set the Jews apart for the surrounding nations to look in (just like with a fishbowl) and see the absolute holiness and faithfulness of their God, who always kept his word. These people were visibly distinct because their God was distinct from all the false gods of the nations.

Down in verse 14, we see the dividing wall of hostility, which likely refers to the law which separated the Jews from the Gentiles, but Paul's readers would've also had in mind Herod's literal temple wall, intended to keep gentiles from entering the Jewish center of worship. Gentiles were allowed into the outer court, but no further. While the Old Testament law was intended to set Israel apart as a holy nation, over time, the Jews became quite calloused toward outsiders and proud of their heritage and their rule-following. Jews found Gentiles detestable, far outside the scope of God's favor. And Gentiles hated the Jews in return. Dividing along racial lines is an issue as old as humanity itself.

But I'm not a Jew nor am I a middle-eastern gentile living in Ephesus. How does this apply to me? Can't I just take the moral high ground, assert that I've never been a racist, and move on to a text that applies to me? Whenever the Bible addresses sin, it points to an internal problem, and often starts the condemnation close to home. Titus 3:3 shows us we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

This hostility and hatred is not just a Jew and Gentile problem or an out there in the world problem... Because of our sin, we were all hated by each other and hateful toward others. This wall of hostility still exists in our hearts today. And if we're honest, we know we are divided from those around us. We know that we naturally gravitate toward sin and selfishness. We also drift toward people just like us and we stay away from people who are different. With this bleak picture of humanity, is it even possible to actually find peace and reconciliation with God and others?

Our world talks a lot about coexistence and community but it falls so miserably short of true reconciliation. For example, I was talking with a member this week who works at a local business where they refer to employees as family members – and no, he doesn't work for the mafia. But this brother quickly found out just how familial his coworkers would be toward him when he accidentally misgendered one of them. Without intention of harming anyone or even trying to make any controversial claims about gender, he has noticed an uncomfortable difference in the way this once friendly co-worker now treats him.

What happens when the one thing that unites a group of people is no longer true for a member of the group? What happens when we disagree on who to vote for in 2024? Or when we accidentally or even purposefully hurt another person's feelings? Can we still be friends, much less, family? We ought to forsake our false hopes of finding peace with God and others through common interests, shared hobbies, and surface level similarities. If we're naturally at odds with God and the world around us, is there any real hope of peace?

This brings us to our second point: **Reconciled to God and each other (13-18).**

Before we can see how we're reconciled, we ought to ask ourselves, what is reconciliation? The dictionary definition of reconciliation is a restoration of friendly relations, the action of making one view or belief compatible with another, or the action of making financial accounts consistent. These definitions fall woefully short of the Bible's idea of reconciliation.

Did you notice how reconciliation to God, through the person and work of Christ is both a saving FROM our sin and INTO the church? The Biblical definition of reconciliation here is going from far away from

God to near, from hostile to peaceful, from people divided to one new humanity, from strangers and aliens to fellow citizens and family members in God's household.

Reconciliation isn't just a melding of two beliefs through compromise to produce compatibility. Reconciliation in our passage isn't Jews and Gentiles learning to coexist with their differing worldviews. Reconciliation here makes an entirely new community of Christians, those reconciled to God in Christ, made into one unified people! So how does that happen?

The way we are reconciled to God and reconciled to one another is the same – the good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us back to God. It is Jesus' atoning work for sinners that unites us as people together. Look at the number of references to Jesus' work in our passage. This reconciliation happens IN Christ Jesus, by the blood of Christ who is Himself our peace, who made us one and broke down the dividing wall between us... he did so in his flesh - In his coming to live the perfect life we couldn't and die the death we deserved!

Paul goes on in verse 15 to say that Jesus abolished the law of commandments expressed in ordinances for the purpose of creating a new, undivided people... now, before we move on, how can that be? Doesn't Jesus himself say that he didn't come to abolish the law or prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17)? The ordinances Paul is referring to here are the rituals and regulations, including dietary restrictions, that were intended to separate Israel from the surrounding nations. This is different than the natural law, the 10 commandments given to Israel and now written on our hearts. Jesus does not abolish the command not to murder or steal or commit adultery.

One theologian says that this simply means Jesus abolished "human traditions that were barriers to union among his people." He came to abolish the surface level circumcision of verse 11, the powerless "made in the flesh by hands" version of separating people from one another.

There is one, gleaming moment in this passage where the work of Jesus on the cross is in crystal clear view. Read **verse 16** with me again – "and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility." The cross, where Jesus was killed for our sake, was for our collective reconciliation to God, in one body. And when he was killed, he killed the hostility between us. It doesn't say, "and might reconcile me to God, by myself through the cross."

Perhaps you've been told that if you were the only person on earth, Jesus still would've died for you. That's an unbiblical hypothetical. You're not the only person on earth and while Jesus' love for you is deeply personal, it cannot be separated from your corporate identity in the church. Jesus died for his people, not his person. We often reduce the Bible to a highly personalized guidebook, written to me to live out my faith in private. But the Word of God is written to the corporate people of God.

Think about who Paul is addressing here – the you's and we's and us', not just here but in all the new testament are all aimed at the corporate, gathered people of God. I say to students all the time... you cannot follow Jesus apart from the church. It's like the Frank Sinatra song, love and marriage, ya can't have one without the other.

How so? Because it is impossible to be reconciled to God but separated from the church. The Gospel accomplishes reconciliation between both.

Which is why John can say later on, “If anyone says ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar.” In other words, it is not possible to have saving faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection if you hate others. With his death comes the death of our hostility. So in the same way that our spiritual deadness in sin simultaneously separates us from God and each other, Jesus’ death simultaneously reconciles us to God and each other.

In *our* flesh, we were separated from Christ and each other, alienated, at odds, strangers, enemies of God and each other, hopeless and Godless in the world. In Jesus’ flesh, he drew near to us who were far off in our sin, he lived how we couldn’t, died how we deserved, and in so doing brought us peace with himself and others.

Look at verse 17-18 – Jesus came to preach peace to all – those who thought they were near because of their access to the law and those who knew they were far off (gentiles). Now, the thing that binds us together is shared access to the Father, through Christ’s reconciling work, brought about and sustained by the Holy Spirit who now lives within every single believer. But who is brought together? Which people are we reconciled to? After all, Peter calls Christians strangers and exiles in the world.

Christians, those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus’ work are reconciled to one another and become the church. The church consists of every single believer across time and space, but is made visible and tangible in local groups of gathered believers, covenanted with one another, not neglecting to meet together, teaching and admonishing one another, reflecting the reconciling power of the gospel to the world around us.

And we’ll see more about how that fleshes itself out in our third point: **Growing in Christ together.**

Consider a few of the illustrations that Paul employs in this passage – citizenship and family, as well as the temple. First, he contrasts our former life of estrangement and alienation to our new life of fellow citizenship with the rest of the household or family of God.

Think of what happens when a person becomes a legal citizen of the US. All the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship are given to them. To consider them less American than me because I was born and raised in Montana is categorically untrue. Along these same lines is the idea of adoption. When done correctly, an adopted child gets the name and same access to the family, inheritance, and all the legal rights and ramifications as any other member of the family would.

One commentator says of our new life in Christ, “now, we share in Christ’s spectacular privileges in his kingdom and family. We’re not illegal immigrants dodging the border guards, but ‘fellow-citizens’ of heaven, enjoying an eternal freedom to remain, passports stamped with the King’s blood, entitled to all the benefits of the new-creation paradise.”

But how is the church God’s holy temple? Well in the Old Testament, God’s people would come to the temple to worship God, be instructed in his ways, make sacrifices for their sin, and be joined together with the rest of God’s covenant people. The temple was the place God’s presence dwelled with God’s people. It’s physical construction was beautiful, eye-catching, and comprised of individual bricks, built on a sturdy foundation with one brick arguably more important than the rest – the cornerstone.

In ancient masonry, the cornerstone was typically the first brick laid, the one by which every other brick in the building would be lined up and made square. It guided, directed, and preserved the structural integrity of the building. To remove it would be to bring the whole building crashing down to the ground. This is why Paul calls Jesus the cornerstone of this new, living temple, in whom the whole structure grows. There is no true Christian community apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ, and His ongoing work in the lives of his people.

He goes on in verse 20 to describe the foundation of this building as the word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, but spoken and written by both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. Both the apostles and prophets were God's chosen instruments of revealing himself to his people. The significance of this is massive. The foundation of God's holy temple, the church, is his word. This strips our ability to say we like Jesus but reject Paul. This prevents us from being so-called "red letter Christians", or ignoring the Old Testament, because all of God's inspired word points us to Jesus. This is why we give so much time each week to somebody droning on up here, explaining the word of God. The Bible is the foundation on which Jesus has been and will continue to build his church.

So what does it mean that we are being built into God's temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit? For starters, we're bricks. And to be honest, we're not all that useful on our own. A brick chiseled out of the building is not only useless but it leaves cracks in the structure. To remove a Christian from the church and expect him or her to remain productive and useful would be no different. It's a biblical non-reality. But don't let that diminish the significance then that each individual brick plays in the corporate mission of the living temple! Notice Paul's language that this temple is both already built (we ARE fellow citizens, we ARE built on the foundation of apostles and prophets) but it is also not yet complete, in that we are BEING built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Listen to one commentator's thoughts on how we are presently being built into this dwelling place for God: "God is gradually refurbishing his home in our hearts and churches, to suit his holy character, by his Spirit through his word. Christ wants his churches to be welcoming to strangers, faithful to their gospel foundation and increasingly holy. He wants churches that provide a little foretaste of the glory of heaven!"

Isn't that beautiful? This spiritual temple is still under renovation and construction, there is work to be done on this incredible building. Existing bricks are being sanctified alongside one another. And bricks are being added day by day through our evangelism - calling the lost to repentance and faith in Jesus. And one day, this temple will be complete. All the family of God, every citizen of his kingdom, will be unified as God's holy temple, never to be divided or separated again for all of eternity.

Regardless of what your experience with the church has been - the church ought to exist as a bright beacon of familial hope to the world. A citizenship that isn't always at war but lives peaceably, sacrificially, and lovingly alongside one another. American citizens can argue and fight and divide over politics and all kinds of dumb things, but let that never be true of God's church! The church in Ephesus would have stuck out like a sore thumb to the watching world around them. Former Jews who hated gentiles and former gentiles who hated Jews now embraced one another, shared meals together, and magnified Christ's reconciling power to those around them.

I wonder, Sovereign Hope, if our friendships look odd to outsiders? We leave the curtains open in our house from about 7am to 10pm most days. I hope our neighbors will look through our big living room window and be perplexed at the unusual pairings they see at our kitchen table. What we've found is that some of the most meaningful and deep conversations we've had in the last month have been with people with whom we have very little in common by natural standards. I hope our neighbors wonder when they see us and our kids talking with college students or single moms or widows what we could possibly be doing at the same table.

I believe that one of our greatest evangelistic tools is the corporate testimony of the church – people from all walks of life, different races, ages, stages, occupations... all united in a new, undivided family – whose primary concern is glorifying God together, expanding his temple in the world.

The gospel flips what's natural upside down and creates a supernatural community with nothing to point to as the glue that holds us together but Jesus Christ and His love for us!

When you sit down to look at your calendar for the week or when you consider who you might try to grab a coffee with, invite over for dinner, or go for a walk with... if you're a member, you have a directory full of former enemies, now fellow-citizens and family members you can reach out to. Grab the directory and reach out to someone who isn't exactly like you. Our witness to the world is at stake. Your enjoyment of one of God's greatest gifts to you is at stake.

When you gather with fellow bricks, remember your cornerstone and your foundation – ask each other how you were saved by Jesus and what you're learning from the Bible. Ask each other what's been hard and what's been good recently and how you're each seeing God's faithfulness in your circumstances! Now that we've been reconciled to God and to each other, we look different. Our social calendars look different. Our relationships look different. And we're eternally better off for it. There is great richness to be found in the diverse family that Jesus brought about through the cross.

Sovereign Hope, Missoulians need to be reconciled to God and each other and they need to see how that's possible through us – through the way we, as a body, love one another, including those with whom we have nothing in common but Christ.