

Grace Works Both Ways (Part 2)

Ephesians 2:11-22

July 24, 2005

The famous American playwright, Tennessee Williams once wrote: “*We're all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skin—for life.*” That is a remarkably pessimistic statement. And yet who hasn't at times felt such a sense of isolation? If you have ever traveled abroad—particularly in a country where English is not the primary language, you know what I mean.

Illustration: When I rode the subway in Moscow, I had the feeling that people were looking at me because I was different. Yet when I would look back at them, they would immediately break off all eye contact. There was a conspicuous feeling of isolation and distrust.

To a lesser extent, you may have experienced that even if you have never been out of the country. Like when you move to a different part of the country. Or go to a new school. Or a new place of employment. Or even visit a new church. (One of the things I hated most about going on vacation as a child was visiting a new church and feeling like an outsider looking in). But isolation is not limited to dealing with *new* situations. It occurs in *every-day* situations too. How many people who have been married for years find themselves drifting apart?

Have you ever wondered what causes us to feel disconnected from each other? Is it merely the fact that we are different from others? It might seem that way on the surface. In a marriage, couples start off with many differences—men and women typically look at things differently. Throw in the fact you may have come from different backgrounds or even different ethnicities and suddenly you have all the necessary ingredients for conflict—and isolation. Yet—who made men and women to be so different? God did! You can read all about it in Genesis 2. The differences were never the problem. In fact, Moses records for us in Genesis 2:18-24 that Adam was given the responsibility of naming the other creatures in the garden. In doing so, he not only learned about the power and wisdom of God in creation, he also learned that there was something missing in his own life. He had no counterpart, no companion. After God put Adam to sleep and from one of his ribs formed another creature that was like him, yet with obvious differences, the Bible records that Adam awoke and the first thing he did was to **celebrate** those differences! As he came out of his deep sleep and his eyes were beginning to focus, he noticed Eve and said: “*This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.*” (Could we say that Adam was *beside* himself?) They were alike—yet different. And yet it was the differences that made them able to correspond to fit together. Not only physically but spiritually and emotionally and vocationally and so on. And yet when we come to Genesis 3, sin enters into the garden and suddenly the differences which had been a cause for celebrating become an excuse for conflict. That is why marriages struggle. It is not the differences per se. It is not as simple as identifying the 29 points of compatibility to ensure that you have found your true soul-mate. Because sin, as Pastor Bob has been reminding us lately,

is so powerful and so aggressive that it can move into an even relatively compatible relationship and ravage it.

What may be true in marriages is no less true in the local church. We have different people from different backgrounds and different generations—each with their own idea of what church should look and sound like. That is another recipe for isolation.

Except for the fact that many churches have found the “secret” to that dilemma. One of the so-called keys to church growth is the principle of *homogeneity*. What is that? It is the concept that in order to successfully attract people, you have to determine *who* your specific target audience is and then devise strategies that will attract them. You can actually go through the yellow pages or look at internet advertisements and see churches that have a clearly defined “market niche.” They seek to appeal to a particular demographic group or type because it is well understood that people feel more comfortable around other people who look, talk and act the same way they do. And so you have traditional styles of ministry. Or contemporary. More formal churches. Or casual ones. And while there may seem to be an apparent unity based on shared preferences, it is all too often a unity that is based primarily *on* those preferences rather than the *Gospel itself*. That kind of unity is fragile and fleeting. It doesn’t take too much difficulty or conflict to expose the underlying cracks of isolation that have never been addressed.

In the text that we have been looking at, Paul is talking about a unity that is far deeper and stronger. It is not a unity that plasters over the cracks. It is a unity that seals them with the grace of the Gospel. A grace that is not only vertical but horizontal. A grace that works *both* ways! Read Ephesians 2:11-22.

How does the Gospel help us to *seal* the cracks that so easily divide us? Last time we looked at this text we learned that the Gospel starts by reminding us of our past. In verses 11-12, Paul says...

I. Remember what you were *before* Christ: ***Alienated from each other*** (vs. 11-12).

Paul says remember your life *before Christ* and how you were alienated from God and His people. Do you do ever reflect back on your **BC** (before Christ) days?

C.J. Mahaney, author of [The Cross-Centered Life](#) and former pastor of Covenant Life Church in Maryland talks about the fact that he lives in the same area where he grew up—a place where he used to get high doing drugs. When he happens to go by one of those places, he said: “*Often my eyes fill with tears at the memories of my foolishness and sin. And in the same instant, my heart will be filled with an unspeakable joy, holy joy. I am no longer the same! By the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, I’ve been forgiven of the countless sins I’ve committed. He then adds: “Many people today try to run from their sins. I suppose I could try to as well, by leaving the hometown that holds so many reminders of my sinfulness. But I consider living here a gift from God. The regular reminders of my past are precious to me. Why? Because, like Paul, I never want to forget the great mercy shown me.”* It is good to remember what you were before Christ!

In verses 13-18, Paul goes on to tell us to...

II. Recall what Christ has done for us: ***He has made peace*** (vs. 13-18).

Notice again verse 14: “*For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility....*” Through his cross work, Jesus has removed the barriers that separated us from God as well as each other. Verse 15 goes on to describe how He did this. Specifically ...

A. Christ abolished the “law of commandments” (vs. 15a)

What exactly is Paul talking about when he says that Christ abolished the *law of commandments*? How can that be when Christ Himself said that He came not to *abolish* the law but to *fulfill* it? (See Matthew 5:17). How can you abolish something without abolishing it? To understand this, we have to take a closer look at the law itself. The Hebrew word for law means “teaching.” The law was given to teach us just how impossible true obedience is—and how desperately man needs a Savior to do for him what he himself cannot do. It did this in two different ways. First, there was a part of the law that pointed to God’s character—the sort of character necessary for people to dwell with Him. We call that the moral law—which is illustrated by the 10 commandments. To be holy as God is holy means to love God and your neighbor perfectly. Jesus helps us see the real meaning of the moral law in the Sermon on the Mount. There He pointed out that the law prohibits not only wrong actions, but even wrong motives. It forbids not only murderous *deeds*, but murderous *words* and even murderous *thoughts*. You say how can you have murderous words or thoughts? In Matthew 5:22 when He talked about not calling someone “*raca*” or “*fool*,” He was talking about terminology that essentially accuses people of being “worthless” or “good for nothing.” It is that kind of thinking that ultimately causes people to kill someone or abort a baby. But whether it actually plays out in an act of murder or not—it is sin all the same and worthy of judgment.

Jesus did not abolish the moral law by removing it as a standard of behavior. Murder in any sense will *forever* be wrong. But He did abolish the moral law as a *way of salvation*. In this sense, the law was a barrier—or at least it served to remind us of the barrier of our sin that existed between us and God. Jesus removed that barrier by abolishing the condemnation of the moral law when he took the penalty that sinners like you and me deserved. But that is not all...

There was another kind of law that is also implied here. The ritual or ceremonial laws. These laws included laws of cleanness and uncleanness, dietary laws and so on. These laws were temporarily given to Israel as sort

of an object lesson to remind them of their inward, *spiritual* pollution. The ritual laws were so detailed and so specific that Israelites would constantly find themselves unclean and in need of ritual purification. Contact with dead animals or even *normal* bodily functions could render an Israelite “unclean.” But while these laws served as a graphic illustration of the sin barrier between them and God—they also caused a lot of tension and created a social barrier between them and the so-called “*unclean*” Gentiles. Jews missed the point that these laws were merely to remind them of their own pervasively sinful ways. Instead they arrogantly and disdainfully looked down upon their non-observant Gentile neighbors. In that sense the ritual law led to a hostility between Jews and Gentiles. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, He completely set aside these ritual laws. All that they taught about man’s need of a cleansing that he could not accomplish by his own effort pointed to the Lamb that was slain and by whose blood sinners could be completely cleansed. When this happened, the ritual laws were no longer needed and down came the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. It took awhile for the Church to work through this. And you can read about all the discussions they had at the first church council in Acts 15. You can also read in Romans 14 as well as the books of Galatians and Colossians to understand what happened when some of the Jewish believers refused to let go of the mandatory observance of these ritual laws. Paul had to spend a lot of time helping them work through this because their desire to hold on to their “*Jewishness*” was hindering God’s plan for the Church. What was that plan? Paul goes on to say that...

B. Christ created *one* new humanity out of the two (vs. 15b).

Ever since Genesis 3, sin had divided people. There was the line of Seth and the line of Cain. Then things got so bad, God started all over again after the flood. Then there was Babel—man’s proud attempt to reunify the human race in order to make a name for himself. So what does God do? He scatters the human race by confusing the languages. Then He sets apart a man named Shem to make a name for Himself. And from Shem comes Abraham to whom God makes a promise—“In You *all the peoples* of the earth will be blessed.” Then Moses, then David—and finally the *Son of David*. And that Son of David, Jesus Christ is the name above all names, the only name by which anyone can be saved. Jesus is the second Adam who unlike the first Adam who divided the human race by his sin now unites Jews and Gentiles and recreates one new humanity! No more barriers. No more animosity. No more *adjectives*. Like *Jewish* Christians or *Gentile* Christians. Just *Christians!*

But this unity does more than heal the breach between Jews and Gentiles. (Read Colossians 3:11). It creates one new community—a new and redeemed human race consisting of all who are in Jesus Christ. It crosses

over language barriers, cultural barriers, socio-economic barriers and even racial barriers. It does this by...

- C. Reconciling people to God (and each other) through the cross of Christ (vs. 16-18).

As John Stott has noted in his commentary on Ephesians (p. 102):

“Christ crucified has thus brought into being nothing less than a new, united human race, united in itself and united to its creator.”

Of course this does not mean that the whole world has been restored to what it was before the Fall. The cross has achieved peace but the actual accomplishment of that peace must be proclaimed through the Gospel of Peace (Read verse 17).

Jesus did that in His post-resurrection appearances to the Apostles—and then through them to the Jews first and them to the Gentiles. And He continues that preaching even today through the Church—both locally and internationally through missions. Because of that—all believers have the same privilege. Full access to the Father by the same Holy Spirit. That truth is what connects us. Not the fact that we look the same. Or talk the same. Or sing the same. Or root for the same team. It is that we have the same access to the same Father by the Spirit—*through* the cross! Is that something to shout about or what?!

So what are we do with this truth? You and I need to start thinking in a radically different way! We need to...[

- III. Recognize what we have *now* become in Christ: ***We are God’s New Creation*** (vs. 19-22).

Paul tries to summarize this section by using three metaphors that help us to more effectively grasp who we really are and why we are here. The first two metaphors describe our *identity*. The last one helps us to understand our *purpose*. Specifically, we are...

- A. God’s citizen’s (vs. 19a)

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people....”

I am proud to be an American—but the longer I live, the less I see my identity wrapped up in my earthly citizenship. As a citizen of this country, I am thankful for the heritage by which we have all been so blessed. But Paul tells us in Phil. 3:20 that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. My Dad has always been a patriotic American. But as he lies dying of

cancer, I hear less talk about America and an increasing interest *in* and anticipation *of* heaven. Why? Because of God's providence he is an American. But by God's redeeming grace He is a citizen of God's kingdom.

When we were in Russia, we were constantly reminded that we had a different citizenship. Every time we went to a different place, we had to show our passport. Yet it didn't take long for me to discover how *much more* we had in common with our Russian brothers and sisters. Here we are in a different country—a country with whom we have had great hostility until recently. A country with a different flag. A different national anthem. A country with a very different culture and a different language and different foods and a different economic way of life. Yet we felt so at home. Why? We had a common love and a common hope and a common purpose driven by a common passion for our *uncommon* Savior!

Illustration: We love to joke with Alexander about his old occupation in K-C when he was employed in a chemical weapon factory! And now we are citizens of the same kingdom under the same Commander—warring against the same enemy! Why? Because *Jesus is our Peace!* But we are not only God's citizens, we are...

B. God's family (vs. 19b)

"...members of God's household..."

We are even more than fellow citizen's under the same rule. We are all children in the *same family!* We don't have to mess with passports because we have the *same birth certificate!* We have a relationship that is thicker than human blood—paid for by the blood of God's Son, our Elder Brother!

Wow! Are you thinking what I am thinking? Are you allowing this truth to work into your heart, your life, your Day-Timer? What I mean is—how much of your life has been invested into things that don't even match your identity? Are you tapping into your identity—are you experiencing the joy and strength that God wants you to experience through relationships with your brothers and sisters that reinforce your reason for being on earth? Or are you like the girl I read about who had been adopted when she was a baby—only to find out years later that the woman with whom she worked side by side for several years was actually her biological mother. She never knew it. What a tragedy to have such a rich resource in the family of God—and live in practical isolation!

The last metaphor here moves from our identity to our purpose. We are...

C. God's temple (vs. 20-22).

Now there is a lot in this passage, more than I have the time to explain in its entirety. But let's make sure we get the main point of this last metaphor. Paul describes the church as a building. The NT apostles and prophets, the ones through whom God revealed the truths about the Gospel and the Church—they are the foundation. Jesus Christ is the Cornerstone, the stone by which everything else is lined up. He is the standard of what authentic Christianity is all about—His life and teaching. As He builds His church, He is making it stone by stone into a holy Temple in which He lives and dwells by His Spirit.

So what is the point of this metaphor? As Paul was thinking about the Church in Ephesus, there stood the great marble Temple of Diana, one of the “Seven Wonders” of the ancient world—and in whose inner shrine was a statue of the goddess, Diana or Artemis. At the same time in Jerusalem, there stood the Temple built by Herod the Great with its barricades against the Gentiles. A temple that had housed for centuries the holy of holies and the shekinah glory—yet a glory which when revealed in Jesus Christ it had sought to extinguish. Two temples—both designed to house deity. One pagan, the other in honor of the true God. But both empty and devoid of the Living God. Why? There is a new Temple. It is called the Church. And it consists as Peter tells us in I Peter 2 not of marble stones or limestone. But *Living* Stones. Not just one kind—but many. This Temple is transcultural in every way. Not homogeneous but diverse! How do I know? Because that is what the Gospel is all about. It consists not only of the Sons of Abraham because—remember what God said? “*In you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.*”

We hear that echo in the Great Commission. Go make disciples of all nations—lit. *all* ethnicities! We hear that echo in heaven itself in Revelation 5:9-10:

*9 And they sang a new song:
“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.”*

Remember what you were—alienated from God. Remember what Christ has done: He has made our peace with God and each other. And finally, Recognize what you now are in Christ. Don't let yourself be defined by your temporal circumstances, but rather by your new identity and purpose *in Christ*.

So what does all this mean for you and me? What do we take home from this and begin to do?

Two applications:

1. Your identity and purpose means that your salvation and your commitment as a follower of Christ involves so much more than a “get-out-of-hell free” card. By placing you in Christ and into the body of Christ (which is also this great Temple that God is building before a watching universe-Eph. 3:10) you have a great calling. Such a great calling demands a response. See Eph. 4:1-3 and its implications in working out the peace in practical relationships! [
2. If God is the one who is selecting the building materials—and the stones are not homogeneous but diverse—and if the diversity of the building is part of the statement that God is making about His and wisdom and ability to do what no one else can do—put a fragmented humanity back together again—then we ought to be praying and doing all we can to reach those other stones. Stones like us and different from us. I am not saying that we ought to put ourselves on some kind of quota system. That is what the world does—and it doesn’t work that way. I mean that ought to be our passion. And even if we can’t see the diversity in our midst, we ought to praying for Detroit and the diverse peoples of this city in a way that captures John’s vision in Rev. 5:9!!

Example: Walking into Randazzo’s and hearing 3 or 4 different languages! A glimpse of Acts 2. And a peak at heaven. Pray. Pray for laborers right here in our own harvest field. Reach out to foreigners. Practice hospitality. Teach an **ESL** class in your neighborhood. And aim to live Christ so you can share Christ with them.

Pray for Detroit. Pray that God will raise up many churches that preach the Gospel and have a heart to hold forth the Word of Life to a dying city! Pray that the Gospel will begin to do what no political organization has been able to do in Detroit. Show the city how the Gospel is able to remove the race barrier for the glory and honor of Christ. Sound impossible. You have just used a word that describes the very thing God is into. It is time for us to believe it and start behaving like we believe it in our passion and in our prayers. In fact, it is the impossibility of this not so modest proposal that causes Paul to end the first major section with this prayer in Ephesians 3:20-21:

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.