

Anchored. Part Five. A New Humanity
Ephesians 2.11-22
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You may or may not have noticed this, but sometimes human beings have a hard time getting along.

Okay, maybe a bit more often than sometimes.

All right, human beings *always* seem to struggle to get along. Put two humans in a room, and sooner or later, one of them is drawing a line between them.



From the Minnesota Daily, taken at Stadium Village, Minnesota, during a protest in 2009 over engagement in Afghanistan

This is a picture taken during a protest about the Afghan war that took place over fifteen years ago. But it could have been taken yesterday, and it could have been taken two hundred years ago – well, if we had cameras then. It captures a dynamic that has marked the whole of human history.

Historians Will and Ariel Durant calculated that out of over 3400 years of recorded history, there were only 268 years that were free of a major war. And if you took into account more localized conflicts, not only was there not a year without conflict, but there was scarcely a day.

Historian Jared McKinney drew a similar conclusion. He said that war has been the norm in human history, and that the famous peaceful eras, such as the Pax Romana, usually just meant that one powerful group had beaten everyone else into submission.

Human beings always seem to struggle to get along.

Wouldn't it be nice if it could be different? If what we experienced was unity rather than hostility?

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In the passage of Scripture we're looking at today, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesian church claims that God is doing a radical redeeming work when it comes to human relationships. Where the norm in our dealings with each other is conflict and hostility, God is doing something new, something miraculous. Nothing less than a new creation. God is making all things new.

Two weeks ago, when we explored the first half of Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1-10, we explored what God was doing on an individual level – bringing into existence a new human *being*.

Today, as we explore the second half of the chapter, verses 11-22 of chapter 2, we'll see what God is doing on a collective level – bringing into being a new human *race*.

Here's a chart I came up with that shows the significant parallels between these two creation accounts: the one Brently led us through two weeks ago, and the one we're looking at today.

God's New Creation

The Individual 2.1-10	The Body of Christ 2.11-12
The Problems: Death and Sin Me within myself Me with God	The Problems: Hostility and Separation Us with each other Us with God
The Solution Made alive and made new in and by Christ	The Solution Made right and made one in and by Christ
The Results: Life and Goodness Me within myself Me with God	The Results: Peace and Reconciliation Us with each other Us with God
A new human being Doing God's work	A new human race Displaying God's presence

We won't dive into the details, but suffice it to say that, according to Paul in verses 1-10, which we looked at two weeks ago, apart from Christ, we as individuals are marred by sin and held captive by a sort of spiritual death. We are alienated from ourselves and from God.

But through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are made alive and made new by Christ.

Those who have put their faith in Jesus are now *new human beings* doing good works for God's sake in this world.

And in a parallel way, according to verses 11-22, the passage we're looking at today, apart from Christ, our relationship together as human beings is marked by hostility and separation. That's true in our dealings with each other, and that's true in our dealings with God.

But once again, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God puts things right. He makes us right with him and with each other.

Those who have put their faith in Jesus are now *a new human race*, and together, through our love, we put God's presence on display in this world.

God is taking us from this . . .



to this.



This is a picture of one of the teams in the Human Tower Competition in Tarragona, Spain.

Teams of up to 600 people work together to build human towers that can reach as high as ten people high. Men, women, younger people, older people, each one distinct, but all working together as one toward one common cause.



What a beautiful picture of the church as God intends it to be! As God is making it to be! Not a random collection of individuals, each seeking their own needs; not opposing camps lining up against each other; but human beings joined together as one human race for the sake of something greater than any one of them individually. Nothing less than a new humanity, one in Christ!

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Today's passage is Ephesians 2.11-22.

Here's the whole passage shown in a way that highlights all the words related to the theme of unity.

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)— 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been **brought near** by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our **peace**, who has made the two groups **one** and has **destroyed the barrier**, the dividing wall of hostility, 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**, and in **one** body to **reconcile both** of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached **peace** to you who were far away and **peace** to those who were near. For through him we **both** have access to the Father by **one** Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but **fellow** citizens with God’s people and also **members** of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 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.

The word "one" is repeated four times, "peace" is mentioned three times, and several different terms for the idea of "coming together" show up throughout.

It's pretty clear what God has most in mind when he thinks about the church, isn't it?

Is that what comes most to mind when you think about the church?

* * *

So let's walk through this passage and its description of God's creation of a new united humanity.

Ephesians 2.11-12

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)—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.

Before we go on, there are a couple of important details that I want to take some time to open up.

First, to clarify an important term. The word "Gentile" in this context means someone who doesn't have a Jewish heritage. Around the time this letter was written, the Christian church throughout the Mediterranean was about 50/50, Jewish and non-Jewish, but in the Greco-Roman city of Ephesus, the majority of believers were not from a Jewish background. Paul – who *was* from a Jewish background himself – addresses the non-Jews here.

He says: It's so easy to forget – to move on from the miracle and wonder of it all. You who are from a non-Jewish background – stop and bring this to mind. There was once a time when you had no direct access to God at all.

Now, as we read this, it might be helpful to remember that the arrangement during the first covenant – which is how God provided for relationship with himself in the Old Testament – went like this:

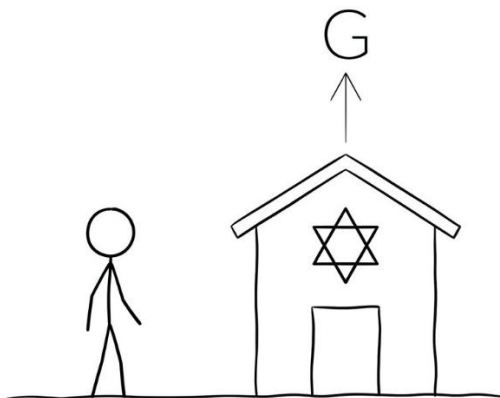
God exists. He wanted to be known. So he set apart *one* people group as his own, the Jewish people, and showed himself in miraculous ways to them.

Then, according to God's charter in Genesis 12, *they* had the privilege and responsibility of turning to the rest of the people groups and introducing them to God and inviting them to

follow him too. They have been blessed in order that all people groups on earth will be blessed through them.

But think about what that means for someone who isn't Jewish but longs to know God.

Before Christ



That means that the only way to come to God was to come in *through Judaism*, to come into the Jewish community first.

And there were only two ways to do that: either by becoming what was known as a *proselyte*, getting circumcised and becoming a full-fledged, law-abiding Jew, or by worshipping with the Jewish community without becoming a full Jew, as someone who was known as a "God-fearer," in which case you always felt like someone who was half in and half out of the believing community.

But either way, the only door of access was through the synagogue and the Jewish faith.

Paul says in this passage: It was a bleak situation for you. Because you weren't part of the Jewish people, you were excluded from the Jewish faith. Because you were excluded from the Jewish faith, that meant you were excluded from participating in the Covenant relationship with God that the Jewish people had. And because you were excluded from the covenants of promise, that meant you were without hope and had no relationship with God.

That was the painful *spiritual* situation you found yourself in before you came to know Christ.

But you were also in a painful *relational* situation. There was a huge relational division between the Jews and the non-Jews which Paul surfaces here.

A bit more background here.

Under the first covenant, the relationship between Jewish people and the rest of the world was confusing. Because, on the one hand, there were all sorts of passages in the Old Testament that called the Jewish people to show respect and honor to the foreigners in their midst. We'll be exploring those more next week.

So, for instance, in Leviticus 19.34, it says:

You must regard the foreigner who lives with you in the same way you regard the native-born among you. You are to love him as yourself.

But then, on the other hand, the Scriptures often encouraged the Jewish people to separate themselves from non-Jewish people because of their pagan beliefs and their ungodly practices.

So, for example, Ezekiel 44.9 says:

This is what the Lord GOD says, "Of all the foreigners who are among the Israelis, no foreigner who is uncircumcised in both heart and flesh is to enter my sanctuary."

But too often, especially after they returned from the exile, the Jewish people lost track of the distinction between the person and his or her faith and practices. They mistook God's call to separate themselves from people who rejected God and from their immoral practices for a call simply to separate themselves from all non-Jews.

So for example we read this in Nehemiah 9.2:

Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from *all* foreigners.

More and more they came to see themselves as ones whose job it was to protect God from godless foreigners instead of drawing them to him. I wonder if we evangelicals may not fall into making the same mistake at times.

So when Paul says here in chapter two that the Jewish people called the non-Jews "the uncircumcised" and themselves "the circumcised," that wasn't just a factual description. It's clear from the context that this is a term of contempt for the non-Jews and pride for the Jews.

We know from other sources that sometimes some of the people of Jewish descent would refer to Gentiles as "dogs": wild and unclean animals that scavenged in the trash pits and were not to be trusted.

You can feel the scorn and fear that the Jews felt, and you can imagine the pain of feeling judged and rejected that the non-Jews would have felt.

Paul – himself from a Jewish background – has no patience for this judgmental name calling and hostility. You can tell that from the comment he makes here about the Jews.

If you wanted to try to catch the edge in these words – both in how the Jews talked about the Gentiles, and in the dig Paul shot back at his fellow Jews – you could translate the *feel* of this verse like this:

Remember that you non-Jews – who were so scornfully called "the godless uncircumcision" by those who delight to call themselves "the holy circumcised," thinking they are a cut above everybody else, even though the source of their bragging is nothing more than a medical procedure done by human hands and has nothing to do with what goes on in their hearts – remember that at that time you were in quite a fix spiritually.

So, Paul introduces two problems that faced the non-Jews at the same time: a great gulf between them and God, and great hostility between them and the Jewish people.

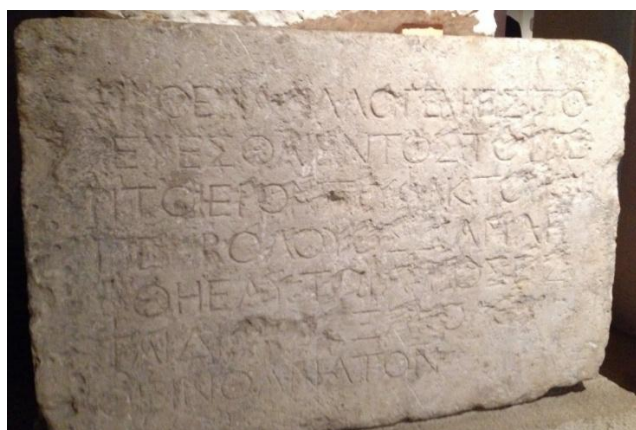
But then the new covenant was introduced, centering on Jesus.

Paul says in

Ephesians 2.13-15

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

You may be aware that during the time of Jesus, and of Paul, there actually was a literal dividing wall in the temple grounds called the *soreg*. It separated the grounds around the temple where the Gentiles were allowed to stand from the temple courts where the Jewish people were allowed to go. At every opening in the *soreg* there was a sign chiseled in stone.



It says: "No foreigner is to go past this embankment barrier and enter inside the sanctuary. Anyone caught is himself responsible for the death penalty that will follow."

So, if you were a non-Jew, that was as far as you could go, and all you could see from there was a sixty-foot-high wall that ran all the way around the temple, and maybe the roof of the temple itself over that top of that wall, and perhaps some smoke rising up from the temple courtyard behind the wall.

I wonder, if you were a non-Jew standing there, watching Jews walk past you and on into the temple courtyard, if you might not end up feeling more excluded than included.

That literal wall must have been in Paul's mind when he was talking about the spiritual and relational walls that left Gentiles feeling as though God didn't have a place for them.

Little wonder that, if part of Jesus's purpose in coming from heaven to earth was to tear down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, and between Gentiles and God, little wonder that the moment of his deepest rage in all of his ministry was when he stormed through the temple grounds breaking apart a system that was designed to make access to God difficult.

Remember what he said as he began flipping tables?

"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer *for all nations*'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" (Mark 11.17)

Jesus came to open up access to God for all. Which is where Paul goes next.

First rereading **Ephesians 2.13-15**

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

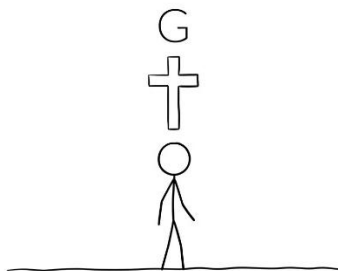
Ephesians 2.15-18

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Now, Paul says, both gaps have been closed, both hostilities have been put to rest – the one between God and sinful and rebellious humanity, and the other between sinful and rebellious human beings.

First, Paul says, in the new covenant, Jesus has opened up a new way into relationship with God that doesn't require you to go through the door of Judaism. Anybody can get to God directly through him, just by trusting him!

After Christ



By his blood – that is, through his death on the cross in our place, the innocent in the place of the guilty – Jesus paid our penalty and he removed all that stands between us and God.

Fulfilling the requirements of the law and the sacrificial system once and for all in *himself*, through his own death, he took away the burden of us having to satisfy the requirements of the law *ourselves*.

God created us for relationship with himself. And now all that is required for us to gain access into that relationship is for us to receive the gift, and to follow Jesus through the door that he opened: to put our faith in him, trusting his love for us, entrusting our lives to him, and then to be ushered into relationship with the God who loves us.

But through his death on the cross, Jesus also removed all that stood between the non-Jews and the Jewish people, and between *all* who are at odds with one another all across humanity.

You sense from Paul's words that, despite their now belonging to one church family, there were carryover divisions and negative attitudes that had crept into the church, making it difficult for Christians from a Jewish background and Christians from a non-Jewish background to get along.

But Paul insists that Jesus' forgiveness for our sin against God and his reconciling us to God open the way for us to forgive each other and to be reconciled to each other, regardless of what has divided us.

It is interesting Paul doesn't say Jesus *negotiated* a peace between us. It says he *is* our peace.

That reminds us that Jesus not only was the perfect *sacrifice*, bringing about peace *through his death*. But he rose from the dead, and now he is the perfect *mediator*, bringing about peace *through his life* in our midst. By his Spirit he is actively conspiring to put us right with one another.

Which means that if we are rightly related to him, he is at work to get us rightly related to each other.

Where hostility and separation once ruled, through Christ, reconciliation and peace reign instead. That leads to the last part of this passage.

Ephesians 2.19-22

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 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.

Short version: You are not outsiders anymore, you are insiders. All of you. All that had only been the hope and promise of the Jewish people is your hope and promise as well.

And we are not divided any more. We're not a bunch of individuals, each fighting for ourselves and our own causes and our own needs. And we're not a divided group, two camps fighting against each other. We are one in Christ.

Not only that, but in a mysterious way that is beyond our comprehending, we are not just a new humanity, we together are *a new temple for divinity*.

Christ Jesus himself [is] the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord . . . a dwelling in which God lives.

We together, sinful and flawed beings that we are, because of the gracious work of God for us and in us and between us, we together are the place where God dwells on earth.

What glimpses of God do we give the onlooking world?

In what way might our interactions put God on display in our community?

Let me conclude by naming three implications from this passage.

1. First, we are called to *recognize the reality of our God-given unity*.

Remember! Paul says. You are part of something larger than yourself!

It's clear from the way Paul structured this chapter that he sees God's creation of a new *us* as every bit as important in God's eyes as his creation of a new *me*. That has profound and challenging implications, especially for those of us who grew up here in the US, who are so individually minded.

I am not just me. I am part of us.

If you see a person wearing a uniform, what's your first thought? There is no such thing as a solo football player, or a solo military officer. Your first thought is: Where are the rest of you? Where's the rest of your team? Your unit?

Every follower of Christ is a member of something larger than ourselves. We're all part of the family of faith. We are not just next to each other. We are joined to each other.

Think about grains of rice in a box or a bag. That is mere proximity. It just happens to be in the same place. That's a common way people think about the church. It's just a gathering of individuals. Have you ever tasted rice straight from a box? I have. Once.

Now think about rice in a meal – say, in a yellow curry chicken dish. Have you ever tasted yellow curry chicken? I have. Dozens of times.

The rice is transformed through cooking. In the process, it has become sticky, joining readily to other grains of rice. Then it becomes part of something still larger when it is scooped into a bowl, becoming a base for other ingredients, and then absorbing the seasoning and color of the sauce, and in so doing, becoming integral to the taste and substance of the meal. We together become a delicious meal that nourishes others and satisfies their spiritual hunger.

We are part of an us. That leads straight to the next implication. What is the life giving nourishment that we offer this spiritually hungry world? God himself!

2. We are called to *remember the reason for our unity*

In verse 22 Paul says that, in Christ, we are being built together to become a *temple*, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

What was the function of a temple in the ancient world? It was the place where God drew near to humanity, *and* it was the place where humanity could draw near to God. That is the purpose that we collectively serve in this world! We are his temple! We house God! We bring God near!

We not only have the privilege of having our own relationship with God! We have the privilege of relating together in such a way that others are drawn to him too!

Let that sink in. We together are the place where God draws near to humanity, and we are the place where humanity can draw near to God. By implication, the more faithfully we live a life of love together, the more we bring God near to those God has placed around us, and the more those God has placed around us can draw near to him.

That means what happens *between* us as a new human race in Christ is every bit as important as what happens *within* us as a new human being in Christ.

If that's true, then that leads to the third important implication.

3. We are called to *strengthen and protect* our unity

Those of you who have been reading through Ephesians will have already made this connection: the entire second half of the book is about strengthening and protecting our unity.

Look at all of the emphasis on unity we will find just in the opening six verses of the second half of the letter.

In Ephesians 4.1-6 Paul will write

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to walk in a manner that is worthy of your calling, live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with **one** another in love. Make every effort to keep the **unity** of the Spirit through the **bond of peace**. There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called to **one** hope when you were called; **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism; **one** God and Father of all, who is over **all** and through **all** and in **all**.

Then, a few verses later, in Ephesians 4.11-16, Paul will tell us that Jesus gave spiritual leaders and servants to the church to equip the church

so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

For Paul, unity and maturity are nearly synonymous.

God's work of making us into a united family requires the hard work of cooperation on our part, with every one of us doing our part. It requires that we refuse to be soil in which the evil one sows seeds, and instead are soil in which the fruit of the Holy One comes to fruition.

That's what Paul will say a bit further along in Ephesians 4.31-32, when he cautions us:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. [all those things that undermine the unity of the church family. Instead, related in ways that strengthens your unity!] Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

And then summing it all up, Paul will come back to the question of what it would mean for us to walk together in a way that is worthy of our calling as a living temple in which the presence of God is put on display in this world.

Paul doesn't leave us guessing as to the answer. In Ephesians 5.2 he says:

Walk in the way of *love*, live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Sound familiar?

Let's keep saying yes to that glorious invitation.

Remembering who we are, remembering what God has done for us, remembering what God has made of us, remembering God in our midst, let's embrace that calling.