

## God's New Community - One in Christ

Ephesians 2:11-17

*<sup>11</sup>Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—<sup>12</sup>remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup>by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup>And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. (ESV)*

Over the next three weeks we'll be exploring what Ephesians says about 'community'. We'll look at what the Bible says about how we should do life together as a church, how we are to relate to each other as a church, and what we should be building towards as a church.

As you plug into a community group, or as you lead a community group, you'll want to understand what makes a Biblical community. You need to make sure that you're building your community on the right expectations and heading in the right direction.

As you meet up with others at church, and as you build relationships with others here at GracePoint, you'll want to make sure that you're building and grounding your friendships on the right foundation; you want to make sure that you're pursuing Biblical and God honoring friendships with the right expectations.

The goal of **community groups** is "*doing life and mission together*". We need to build on the right foundation, have the right expectations, and move in the right direction.

It is **all part of our vision** to bring the saving and transforming power of Jesus to ourselves, our church, our city, and our world in partnership with others. Our vision is built on the conviction that the gospel saves and transforms us and others; that it builds a church or a new community; a community that is living together for Jesus and on mission together with Him in our city and our world.

**Pray with me** that we might build our lives and relationships here at GracePoint on Biblical convictions; that we might pursue God's way in doing life together, seek His help in helping us make changes in the way we relate to each other, all for the glory of Jesus and our joy. Let us be radically different people who live radically different relationships because of, and for Jesus, to His praise and our joy.

So as we come to Ephesians 2:11-17 let me make two observations about doing life together as a church, and what it means for us to be a Biblical community. This is a theologically packed passage so I won't deal with everything in the text. We will limit ourselves to two things that Paul tells us about the community and church that God so desires to build. God's desires and purposes for these two things should be our desires too.

Half of the reason why people become disillusioned with relationships at church, and why there is conflict, division, disappointment, and superficial relationships is often due to them not being grounded in a conviction to be, and to build, the kind of community we read of here in the Bible.

### 1) The gospel saves you into a new community that God has gathered called the church

As you come to v.12, you will see that Paul looks back and asks you to remember your past before God worked His saving grace in your life. Paul has already done this before in vv.1-3.

- *V.12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*

Like vv.1-3 you should remember where you've come from - that was the trajectory of your life outside of Jesus. You were dead in your transgression and sins, walking with your affections enslaved to the devil, world and sinful desires; you were destined for destruction as the object of God's wrath but He made you alive with Jesus. Contrast this to what is said in v.12. Can you see the similarities and differences?

In vv.1-3 Paul speaks of our personal walk outside of Jesus and how God's saving work in our lives is personal. There is the transition in v.4, *but God ... made us alive with Christ ... by grace you have been saved*. But here in v.12 Paul speaks of your personal walk outside of Jesus. It is a life cut off from God's family, excluded from His people, cut off from His community and people, and alienated from the commonwealth of Israel; you were not part of God's chosen people but were strangers to the covenants of the promise; you were foreigners to God's saving promises. Remember that the trajectory of your life outside of Jesus means being dead to Him, excluded from God's family and community, and without hope or God in the world.

But notice what happens in v.13. Like v.4 the transition is significant; you and I are told that God not only saves you and makes you alive with Jesus; we're not just made new creations and given a heart of flesh. He saves you also into a new community. I am saved into the community of the people of God, not to a life of independence but to a life in community with others who are saved by God.

And so you read in v.13: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*. It says that you who were once far off have been brought near; you who were once distant have been brought close. This was an Old Testament way of speaking of those who didn't belong, and those who belonged to God's family.

Paul says there are two kinds of people – *those who are far off and those who are near*. In the Old Testament God's chosen people of Israel described God as being near to them, unlike any other god.

- *Deuteronomy 4:7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?*
- *Psalms 148:14 He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the LORD!*

God and his people of Israel are described in terms of being near and close. Those who are not his people are described as being far off and far away.

And so the good news of the gospel is that God, in His grace and mercy, calls those from afar; He brings those who are far off into His family and makes them part of His people.

- *Isaiah 49:1 Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.*

You read in this passage how God makes plans to call those who are far off, those who are not part of God's chosen people. Isaiah anticipates God's promise to one day call and bring into His family a people from afar through the messiah and promised savior, who was to come not just for His chosen people, but also for those far off - *v.61 will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

Paul is saying that it's happening right here. In Jesus that promise has already happened – *but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ!* You were once excluded, now included. You were once an orphan, now a son. You were once cut off, now brought in (cf. Isaiah 57:19)

Here we're reminded that the gospel doesn't just deal with your sin. It doesn't just bring you to God. **It also saves you into a community; making you part of God's people, adopting you into God's family, and including you into His church.**

The gospel says that the saving work of Jesus is what creates the church. That is what the church is. It is **the community that God is saving people into**, and the gathering of people that God has brought together. You were all once far off; scattered, lost, living in darkness, distant, and alienated, but in Jesus you are now near; you're part of His community, family, and church.

The church is God's new community. God's people gathered here is the crater that has been left behind by the gospel. They are the fruit of the gospel. Where the gospel has taken root in people's lives, and where it flourishes, is where you will find a new community of people doing life together.

Acts 20:28 says that the church exists because of the blood of Jesus. He shed His blood to obtain the church, which is the very same thing we're being told here in vv.13 and in ch.1:7. We are given redemption by the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Here in v.13 we're reminded that God's purpose in saving you was to make you part of His church, His community, and His people.

God's plan and purpose in saving you was to bring you not just to Himself but also to make you part of His church, His community, and His people. The terms 'adoption' and 'salvation' are expressed in family categories in ch.1.

There's no such thing as a churchless Christian. Churchless Christians don't exist in God's economy. On the odd occasion people have said to me: "*I don't have be part of a church community to be a Christian*", which is true because we believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Jesus alone, but the reverse is also true; *if you are a believer you will be part of a church community* – [it's the fruit of the gospel, it reflects a true understanding of the gospel, it reveals where your gospel convictions lie]

If you have never taken the Bible's teaching on church seriously before then let me encourage you to do so. The gospel, the cross work of Jesus, saves you into a new community that God is gathering called the church

The pattern in the Book of Acts is that wherever the gospel is proclaimed and people are saved, new communities will gather, and churches are created where men and women start doing life together. Has it ever occurred to you that the New Testament epistles are letters to churches (except for Jude maybe)? The instructions are on how to do life together in this new community that the gospel has created.

The New Testament repeatedly affirms the high worth and honour given to the church, which is the people of God that are gathered together, and the new community that has been formed by the gospel. We are the body of Christ where we are the parts, and the bride of Jesus that He loves. We are the house of God where He dwells among us, and the temple of living stones where we are the stones and He is the foundation stone.

**There is no such thing as a churchless faith or a churchless believer because the gospel saves me into a new community called the church.** The church is not a theoretical construct, nor a universal body, but an actual gathering of people saved by the gospel to do life together as God's people. Let me remind you that Paul wrote most of his letters to instruct the local gatherings of believers.

**NOTE:** In Acts 9:4 Jesus' words to Paul on the Damascus road were: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* Paul, before he was a believer persecuting and hounding believers, sought out Christian communities to harm them. Jesus makes more of His church than you realise. He has a higher view of His gathered people, more than you realise. When you hurt the church, the community that He has gathered, you hurt Him; when you despise the church, you despise Jesus; when you don't love the church, you don't love Jesus; when you are uncommitted to the church, you are uncommitted to Jesus; when you speak ill of the church, you are speaking ill of Jesus; when you ignore the church, you are ignoring Jesus, and when you deny the church, you deny Jesus. Every time I do this in the way I act, speak, think, and relate to others in the community that God has saved me into, I am doing it to Jesus.

You and I need to remind ourselves of this gospel truth; that the gospel saves me not just from sin, judgment, and wrath; the gospel doesn't just save me to a new life. It saves me into a new community, doing life together with others whom Jesus has saved. Anything less than that is far from the Scriptures, which is why Paul says Jesus died not just to gather you to Himself but to gather you into His family. v.13 says that we were excluded from God's chosen people of Israel, but now by the blood of Jesus we are included into His chosen people. 1 Peter 2:10: *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.*

It is hard for many of us to grasp this gospel priority in our lives. It is difficult to see God's people as a priority in our lives; to make the church a priority in our lives, and to pursue life together as believers as a way of life. It is hard for us to even move in that direction because we are ferociously independent and self centered in the way we live and think. E.g. I like being saved but I don't like people. However, if we want to be faithful to the Scriptures then we need to take God's word seriously. In faith we need to apply them; by prayer seek God's help to live them out, and together pursue it for His glory and our joy.

Too many of us have placed community, church, and doing life together low on our list of priorities. The priorities in our lives should be as follows:

1. My relationship to God - to love Him above all things.
2. My spouse and children if I'm married - to love and care for them.
3. My church community – the people of God I gather with.
4. Everything else – E.g. work, studies, holidays, investments and etc.

Many of us might have 1 and 2 as our first and second priorities, but our third priority is usually not our church community.

**The most useful advise I got from a pastor when I was a student was to get my priorities right, to have clear gospel priorities, and then work to build my life around those priorities.** Because your gospel priorities in life will set the trajectory of your life as you move from student to worker to married to family. As a worker you should choose your work based on its impact on your church community; choose where you live based on how it best serves your church community, and make your investments in view of how it'll benefit your church community. But we do the reverse don't we? We organize our lives and then work out how church fits in it. **Remember what Jesus says** - the way you treat your church community, friendships at church, and community group is a reflection of how you treat Jesus Himself. Matthews 25 says that whatever you did or didn't do for the least of these brothers of mine you did to me.

You want to take the Bible seriously. You want to take God's word seriously and then start unpacking in your life the place of God's people, His community, and the church. **The gospel saves you into a new community that God has gathered called the church. It is paid for by the blood of Jesus. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** The gospel creates community, and the gospel creates the church.

## **2) The gospel defines our identity, who we are as a community, by uniting us around Jesus and His saving work**

How does the gospel do that? How does the gospel define who we are as a community? It does it by uniting us around Jesus and His saving work.

And so you will notice what Paul goes on to say in v.14. *For he (Christ) himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.* Paul doesn't say Jesus brings peace; he says Jesus is our peace. **In Him** is the way to peace with each other and peace with God; in Him is friendship with each other and friendship with God; in Him is reconciliation with each other and reconciliation with God; for in His death for my sin and your sin He has broken down all the dividing walls of our hostility towards each other and making us one. Paul goes on to say in v.16 that in His death for my sin and your sin He has reconciled us to God, breaking down our hostility to God. We are made one people in Jesus. We need to be right with each other and break down our wall of hostility in Jesus. We need to be right with God, and reconciled to God in Jesus.

Notice what Jesus does in v.14; He makes us. You and I **one**, and He breaks down our walls of hostility, i.e. the things that divide us, make us enemies, and causes us to take sides that He removes. How does he do it? He makes us one and unites us. He removes the things that divide us and does it *in his flesh (ESV)*. This is a reference to His death for our sin. We're

being told here that the blood of Jesus makes us one; it breaks down the things that keep us from being friends, brothers, sisters, [it makes possible fellowship with each other].

How does the cross of Jesus break down the barriers of racial, cultural, social, material, and economical differences? How does the death of Jesus break down everything that divides people? **What divides people at church and in society? What creates division at church or in society and culture?** It comes from a view of how we see ourselves in relation to others and vice versa; how I see myself affects the way I see other people and vice versa; how I see myself in relation to them either binds me to them, makes me one with them, or sets up a wall that keeps them away.

Isn't that how we all work? E.g. the student who sees herself as young and cool in relation to the mums at church whom she considers out of touch; or the working professional who sees himself as successful in relation to those who don't make what he makes; or the guy who sees himself as competent in relation to those who aren't as competent as he is; or the man who feels he is racially superior to another man – isn't that what fuelled the Cronulla riots? - or the woman who believes that her culture is better than those who don't share her cultural background; or the older man who believes that his life experience makes him superior to younger people.

From racial prejudice, to cultural imperialism, to academic elitism, to class distinctions, to banal comparisons – E.g. I'm friends with so and so and not so and so because we click, whatever that means – **all these walls of divisions work on the basis of comparison**. We are always comparing, which leads to one of two things. It either makes us arrogant and proud because we think we are superior to others, OR it leads to resentment and despair because we think we are inferior to others, and it all ends up doing one thing; it all leads to a wall of hostility; a wall that divides us and separates us.

**Let me tell you what the cross of Jesus does.** Let me tell you what the blood of Jesus does. It obliterates our differences; it kills all that we take pride in, all that we boast in and use to define ourselves in relation to others, which is really another form of idolatry. Idolatry is anything in which we take pride in, boast in, and use to define ourselves in relation to others. That's the whole point of remembering where you've come from. Paul addresses all workers and professionals; both young and old; the competent and incompetent; the successful and poor, Chinese, Indian, and the more experienced and less experienced. He asks you all to **look at where you have come from and remember the road that God has saved you from, and the life He has saved you from. (vv.1-3, v.12).**

The only difference between a rich fool and a poor fool in God's economy is that one is poor or rich, but they are both fools. The only difference between a competent man walking in darkness and an incompetent man walking in darkness is that one is competent or incompetent, but they are both walking in darkness. This is the same for a chick young woman who is enslaved to the devil and a socially awkward young woman who is enslaved to the devil; or a doctor under the wrath of God and a garbage collector under the wrath of God. Different culturally, socially, racially, economically but in the same spiritual situation outside of Jesus with nothing deserving to merit God's grace.

In God's economy you were all in the same boat, about to be shipwrecked. Here you were with all the things that divided you; not just your sin that cut you off from God, but your sin that cut you off from each other; the idolatry that cut you off from God, and the idolatry that

cut you off from others. You were equally lost, equally idolatrous, equally proud, equally sinful, and equally damned, but now you are saved into a community by the blood of Jesus. It is *the same blood that was paid for your sin and his sin. It is the same grace you received and she received. The privilege of being adopted that you have he has too.*

In saving you; your identity, who you are, and who they are is now defined by Jesus Himself, who is **our peace** with each other (v.14) and **our peace with God** (v.16). We are no longer defined by race, culture, social standing, or age, skill, gifts, education, and wealth because **in this community there is only one person in whom we should find our identity, worth, and value.** In this community there is only one person in whom we should find **other people's identity, worth and value**; not just how I see myself in Jesus but how I see others in Jesus: *for the one who loved me, and died for me, and now lives in me has also loved you, and died for you, and now lives in you.* I look at myself, a sinner saved by grace, and I look at you, a sinner saved by grace.

**The gospel defines our identity as a community by uniting us around the saving work of Jesus.** The measure by which you see yourself and others by this identity will either draw you to others in this community, or set up a wall in your relationship with them. Write this in your minds and hearts: v.14, *Jesus is our peace who has made us one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing walls of hostility.* It tells me that the key to friendship, community, and doing life together **is to pursue my identity and the identity of others I church with in Jesus and His saving work.** For when two parties move towards Him and see themselves through His work of grace, and see each other by His work of grace, there you will find peace.

Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* says: *I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him ... what determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consist solely in what Christ has done to both of us ... I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.*

You could substitute the word 'friend' or 'friendship' there as well. What Bonhoeffer is saying is that real community, real Christian friendship, and real doing life together is grounded in what Jesus has done for me and to me, and what Jesus has done for you and to you. The measure of our community, friendship, and doing life together is seen in how much Jesus and His saving work is treasured in our lives in a way that everything between us recedes, and He becomes more and more of a treasure to us.

The key to building community, friendships, and doing life together as Christians is to let your identity be defined by the saving work of Jesus. If you pursue friendships, community, and doing life together as an end in itself you will fall into idolatry. It is Jesus who is the foundation, cornerstone, and treasure. The more He is your treasure and my treasure in life, the more we will share life together because we build our lives always around what we treasure, and when you and I share the same treasure, it'll mean that we'll be building our lives around it together. If this is the shape of biblical community then it must also be the shape of our life together as a church community. It should also shape our friendships as believers. **Christ is the cornerstone. He is our peace with God and with each other.**

In fact the more I pursue my identity and the identity of others in Jesus and His saving work, the more He becomes my treasure and the treasure of others; even the disappointments and sin of others can become an occasion for me to give thanks because I'll see that both of us live by God's work of saving grace in Jesus. *'Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably beneficial because it so thoroughly and completely teaches me that neither of us can live by our own words or works, but only by the one word and work which really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mist of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship and community.'*

You see the same thing in Galatians 3:26-29. The same thing we read here in Ephesians 2. Notice how our passage began in vv.11-12 and notice how it now ends in vv.19-22. It is the very reverse. We are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens - FELLOW means we share the same privileges, rights, and benefits - with the saints and members of God's household where Jesus is the cornerstone; not just mine but also yours in this church.

### **Conclusion**

**1) The gospel saves you into a new community that God has gathered called the church. It has been paid for in the blood of Jesus.** The way we do life together as a church, treat friendships in church, and relationships in our community groups are a reflection of how we are treating Jesus.

**2) The gospel defines our identity, who we are, as a community by uniting us around Jesus and His saving work.** This must be what shapes our life together as a church, our friendships in church, and our relationships in community groups.