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True Oneness

Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven

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**Scripture Reading:**

Ephesians 2:11-22

1. 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 – 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.
2. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.
3. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

**Introduction:**

We are making our way through the book of Ephesians. And we said the goal was to have God shape us as *his* church through the preaching (and hearing) of this text. If you’ve been following along, you’ve begun to realize that it’s really not that obvious what it means to be the church.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some may think it’s obvious, since so many of us have been doing church a certain way for a while now. Yet, throughout this series, Paul’s been keen to shine a critical light on our human attempts to domesticate God’s church – from the way we live, think, speak, and act – by correcting and expanding our theological vision of what the church is and what the church is called to be in light of her Lord Jesus Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And so today we’re focusing on the latter half of the second chapter. But before we get into it, what I want to do is quickly look back at Paul’s argument up to this point, in order to see how he arrived at our passage for today, as well as to see how it sets up the trajectory for where he’s headed.

In the opening chapter, Paul lays the groundwork by giving us the big picture, or the cosmic scope of God’s plan. In a nutshell, he says God is working out a plan for all of history “to unite all things in him.” And we are made a part of this plan through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ. For Paul, the practical implementation of that truth is the task of discipleship; that is, doing the work of disciples by continuously being shaped *as* disciples – by the grace of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. (For Paul, these two things are always linked together.) We then saw that the entry point for discipleship is not only acknowledging what God is doing in creation, but immersing ourselves into that reality by having our perceptions of the world radically flipped and altered. As one Eastern Orthodox theologian so eloquently put it, “To regard the world as a mirror of infinite beauty, but as glimpsed through the veil of death.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, to view the world in light of the ‘already but not yet’. To further unpack the implications of that, last time our brother, Justin Hawkins, spoke about a God who is kind to the dead. That in having our eyes enlightened, by having received new life in Christ, we might be able to look past the outward appearances of people into the deadness of their souls, to carry out our task of speaking into their lives the love of Christ.

With the text before us, we’ve now reached, what is in many ways, the climax of Ephesians. Everything prior to these verses has been building up to this central passage, to show us how the love of God poured out in Christ now binds us through faith as the church, which Paul talks about through this theme of oneness. Here we’ll take our time and carefully work through this passage so as not to misconstrue this oneness as a human accomplishment. Moreover, this will be important for us to get right because everything else that follows in chapters 3-6, as well as the way this then gets applied to our lives, rests on this foundational reality.

So, with the remaining time, we’ll ponder yet another mesmerizing part of God’s salvific plan for history, that is, the mind-blowing part where God gathers broken people together in order to effect and bring about his purposes in the world, which is the aim of oneness. But how does God get us there? Paul says we get there in remembering these three things: 1) you were estranged from Christ; 2) you’ve been brought near to Christ; 3) and you are now being built up in Christ.

**Estranged from Christ (vv.11-12):**

Just so we feel the full rhetorical punch of v.11-12, I want to go back a bit and start reading from v.8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. *Therefore 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*.”

The original Gentile audience Paul is addressing here has already been grafted into the nation of Israel through faith. And now that they are Paul is commanding them to remember who they were. This is not a suggestion, it is a command. “Remember the cold, dark pit you were in before God found you!” But why does Paul command them to remember such an unpleasant memory? Why doesn’t he just skip this, and go straight from v.10 to v.13? (i.e. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near…”) Is he just trying to rub past sins in their faces?

Notice, Paul’s command in this passage sounds an awful lot like God’s command to the ancient Israelites. In Deuteronomy 5:6, for instance, it says, “[Remember] I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” And it’s not just here, it’s all throughout the Old Testament, where God, again and again, commands Israel to remember the miserable condition of slavery they were once in.[[4]](#footnote-4) But why? The reason is simply this. Seeing into the hearts of men, God knows that human beings have a tendency to become proud when given grace. That is, we have a tendency to be more enamored with God’s gifts than with the Giver himself.[[5]](#footnote-5) And because Paul knows this, he commands the church: remember your hopelessness, remember how miserable you were when your world was without God, remember the days when you used to be God’s enemy (and how you would still be his enemy apart from Christ).

Now some of us in here may think there isn’t much worth to remember because we’ve been coming to church for a while now, or gave our lives over to Christ when we were very young. But if that’s you, you are not excluded from this text, because that is similarly what the Jews boasted of by way of circumcision.[[6]](#footnote-6) Though Paul is speaking directly to Gentiles, he nonetheless undercuts this sort of Jewish sentiment found in v.11, the sentiment that says we don’t have much to be grateful for because our sins are not as big or as obvious or as reoccurring as the person’s next to us.

Three things we must say to that: first, that sort of pride, rooted in ignorance, is condemned by God all throughout scripture (Luke 5:32); second, Paul is not just saying remember past sins (which are there), but he’s also telling you to remember what you could’ve been had God’s grace not kept you from falling into a deeper life of sin; and third, this is to echo what Justin said last time, any amount of grace is undeserved, and, even if you don’t have a grand conversion story, if you’ve been given grace you have absolutely no reason to boast.[[7]](#footnote-7)

So, what does this have to do with God’s work of bringing about oneness in his church? In saying these things, Paul is tilling the soil of a church that’s begun to swell with pride. He senses that some of the Christians at Ephesus have started to forget – or will be likely to forget – the place from which they came, and in doing so take God’s grace and run with it. Yet by way of remembrance, Paul is commanding the Ephesians to repent of their spiritual pride *so that* it would not hinder the work of God in gathering his people together under the Lordship of Christ.

And this is why the act of remembering, as a spiritual discipline, is commanded for us. Because once we forget who we were, we will immediately begin to take pride in our status of simply being saved, which in that very act itself makes Christ a mere religious badge rather than the Lord who stands over and against us. Do you see why Paul does not take spiritual pride in this sense lightly? And why we shouldn’t either? Once spiritual pride sets in and permeates the church it will cease to exist. So, as long as we remain forgetful in sin, we must return to this again and again, so that by doing so we would *cling* to him.

**Brought Near to Christ (vv.13-18):**

And this is the launching pad that now takes us to v.13. That is, for those who have already been brought near to Christ, the *spiritual* value in remembering these things is to bring us nearer yet, for Christ desires to give more of himself to us.

To be clear, the discipline of remembering is not at its core an intellectual exercise. As I’ve mentioned, it is a spiritual one, and as such it is something that ought to “grip and seize” your soul, as you aim one eye at your sin while aiming the other at Christ. You see anyone can think about how bad they’ve been and even how badly they need a Savior. But as John Piper notes, unless it moves the heart closer to Jesus Christ there is no spiritual value in it.[[8]](#footnote-8) Because as a spiritual exercise, it’s about asking the Spirit who dwells within you to stir and deepen your affections for Christ.

That is why, in conjunction with the preceding verses, we must read v.13 in these two ways. The first reading calls to mind the past moment of justification, namely, the moment when you accepted Christ into your life as your Lord and Savior, who imparted unto you his righteousness. But notice also that it’s written in the present perfect progressive tense, that is, of having been brought near to Christ by his blood. This is the second reading which calls to mind the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, who, through the lifelong process of sanctification, is now moving us closer and closer to Christ. Thus, it is not enough that you have accepted Christ into your life if your delight in him is not being intensified moment by moment.

Notice the movement here. Paul says in v.14 that “*he* himself is our peace.” So, our being made righteous by the blood of Christ now unites us together in him. However, that unity is meant to be strengthened through our ever increasing love for Jesus Christ and through our ever increasing enjoyment of him. Therefore, as we are being pulled closer towards Christ, the gap between us and our neighbors then grows smaller and smaller.

In many churches, pastors and church leaders only talk about unity in that very narrow sense of having been justified in Christ; they think that’s all there is to it. We hear it in shallow churchly platitudes like “We’re united to one another because we’re Christians.” And maybe we hear this within our own walls. However, the oneness Paul speaks of goes beyond that. Don’t get me wrong. It’s certainly not less than that! But Paul is saying it’s more than that. Because if you’re in Christ, you’re being drawn to Christ, and if you’re being drawn to Christ, you’re then being drawn closer to those who are themselves being drawn closer to him.

I cannot express enough how much it grieves me that churches have more often than not relied on corporate models for church life and governance, rather than the living Word of God himself. Specifically, we see this in the way some churches approach the issue of unity and oneness. To be sure, this idea of unity is not unique to Christians. Corporations, institutions, and nations are well aware of its profound significance and impact – if not more so in some ways. As Abraham Lincoln so famously once said in 1858, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” For these entities, however, unity gets codified in the form of vision statements, rules, regulations, and constitutions, all for the sake of upholding and advancing certain principles and interests. Yet there is always a severe limit to such a unity, because constitutions in and of themselves don’t have the power to bring about a deeper spiritual unity that actually binds people together. That is why unity is always falling apart in these places, because there’s nothing substantive about it! It’s superficial.

Unfortunately, though, churches follow suit, trying to codify and center unity in such things that are not Christ himself, even if they are things that are good and biblically true. Many people, for instance, often turn to Ephesians 4 as a guide for church unity, but totally misinterpret what Paul is saying because they don’t read it in context, skipping over what Paul says here in chapter 2. I fear that churches will become more beholden to their visions, by-laws, expectations, and public reputations that they will try to force a unity around these things, proclaiming it all in the name of Jesus, yet overlooking the most important thing of whether or not they and others are actually growing in their adoration and love *for* the living Christ through the spiritual disciplines. If that’s not the case, then this, too, is a superficial oneness, and it will never last. To offer some clarity, I’d like to quote at length Gareth Powell, a bishop and ecclesiologist:

For many people the difficulty is not God but the way in which churches go about the practice of living as God’s holy people. The church as the community of the faithful, the Body of Christ, is not in the pursuit of [oneness] being asked to adopt a management technique that has been of proven worth. We are not in the business of dealing with faith only to treat [oneness] as if it comes from an altogether different source, or for that matter has no role in responsible [ministerial] relationships. There will certainly be things to learn from other communities and organizations, but not at the expense of prayerful living and faithful discipleship. There will be requirements placed upon churches by civil authorities and state laws. Those issues are to be dealt with by a community clearly and diligently focused on responding to [Christ]. Thus the [unity] of the church is as much a part of life and experience as the worship which is offered to God and a sacramental view of the church, its nature and character, raises questions about its [internal life] and structure. The enquiry about the ground of [unity] has to be set very firmly within the sacramental experience [i.e. spiritual disciplines]. This is to ensure that we really do begin with [Christ] and that the activity of the community of faith on earth is infused with such [a love for] God that the [unity] of the church really is a faithful product of the divine economy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The unity brought about by the *living* Christ will not and cannot be codified, because Christ is God, who not only captures our minds but captures our *hearts*, and through the power of the Spirit melds them together in our common pursuit of him. Beloved, this is oneness, in the truest sense, and it’s the sort of unity that we should be seeking after and praying for, because it’s the one that Christ died for. It is a supernatural unity, not a human accomplishment.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For Paul says (vv.14-17), “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility… that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby *killing* hostility.” Here Paul is testifying as loudly as he can to the supernatural quality of this unity made possible by the cross! The true unity of the true church is utterly distinct in its quality from every other kind because even enemies have now been reconciled to one another.

**Built Up in Christ (vv.19-22):**

The last verse comes to us as a sobering yet encouraging reminder. Sobering in that it shows us how we are not yet there; but encouraging in that it is the Spirit of God who will bring it about, for *in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God* by the Spirit*.*

Having said all this, there is, of course, an element of human responsibility. So, what is God calling us to do? First, remember to remember. In v.19, Paul says, “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” This is Paul’s subtle way of reminding the Ephesians what he said seven short verses ago, which they probably already started to forget. Remember you were once strangers and aliens, living on the outside of the Kingdom. But as you remember this, be grateful and magnify the Lord, for you are now members of the household of God. For only in remembering how you got to this place will you then remember that this is *God’s* house, not yours. You are *his* guest. *You* are the one who has been welcomed, not God.

Second, make use of the gifts God has given us, namely, the apostles and the prophets. Though Christ is the cornerstone, they are the foundation, whom we encounter in the Old and New Testaments. They are the primary means by which God mediates himself to us, to produce in us deeper love, joy, and gratitude. But that means you have to come to scripture not seeing it as a dull fix-it manual, but with a *God-fearing* attitude of *expectancy* in trusting that he will reveal to you, according to his measure, more of his beauty, goodness, and grace. Moreover, go to God in prayer. Ask him to deepen your affections, by the grace of his Holy Spirit, to bring you closer to Christ, *and then* watch yourself being united to those who also gather near to him, namely, those who love his holy name.

Lastly, be built up in Christ by looking to the saints around you (v.19), and by looking to the saints who have gone before you, who altogether make up the household of God. Here on earth God has given us the gift of Christian friendship, to encourage each other in this way. Moreover, God has gifted us with the testimony of bold saints who now reside in heaven. We have so much to gain by examining their lives, and by learning from their faithfulness (as well as their mistakes). And we ought to be encouraged, because the great cloud of witnesses now intercedes on our behalf before the throne of God the Father. Indeed, they are praying for the completion of our faith, so that we, too, would one day join with them in the eternal praise of the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb now resurrected who will one day soon bring his church to completion and true oneness forever. Amen.

1. See Gareth Powell, “Governance and Authority: The Basis of Faithfulness,” in *Christian Community Now: Ecclesiological Investigations*, ed. Paul M. Collins (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Powell, “Governance and Authority,” 179. “[F]or the encounter with the living God is the transformation which enables the church to be that which God calls and directs.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Ezekiel 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, (Fearn: Christian Focus Publication, 1994), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Justin Hawkins, “A God Who is Kind to the Dead,” (Sermon, delivered at Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven, 2019), 6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Piper, “Remember that You were Hopeless,” (Sermon, delivered at Bethlehem Baptist Church, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Powell, “Governance and Authority,” 180-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Powell, “Governance and Authority,” 180. “Coming to terms with God as the source of authority and consequent impact upon the structures of governance requires the recognition that the agenda is not human.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)