

Introduction

Good morning. It's great to see you today. If you have a Bible with you, and I hope that you do, I want to ask you to go ahead and take it out at this time. Open it up with me to the Book of Ephesians; we're in Ephesians 2. We are going through this entire Book, looking at "Life Together"... how it is that God intends for us to be together as a church, in light of the grace of God. On top of that, if you don't have a physical Bible with you, it's okay. You can use your tablet or your device... whatever. And if you don't have any of those things with you... I'm surprised... but if that is the case, then you are able to use the Bible that is right there in front of you, in the seat tray that's right there. If you don't own a Bible, that Bible is our gift to you today. For those of you who are new to the Bible, let me explain the way that the Bible works. The Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament gives us a record of God's people, Israel, and about their need for a Redeemer, a Rescuer. The New Testament tells us about who this Rescuer is; His name is Jesus. It goes on and tells us about His birth, His life, His death, and His resurrection, and then all the people who follow Him which are known as the Church. Today we are reading in the Book of Ephesians. Ephesians was written by Paul. Paul was one of Jesus' followers. The story of how he came to become a follower is pretty amazing. You should go back and read that; it's in the Book of Acts. He has written a letter to the Church in the city of Ephesus. That is why this Book is called Ephesians; it's written to people who are Ephesian. So today we are going to read in chapter 2, verses 11 through 22. Before we do that, let me pray over us, and then we'll jump into Scripture.

"Lord, it is so good to be in Your presence. We love You, we praise You, we thank You, God... for all that You do, for who You are. Lord, today we ask that Your Holy Spirit would, through the power of Jesus, take the wall of hostility that many of us have, Lord, and destroy it. God, we need to hear from You today. There are a lot of us who are worried, stressed, broken, and God we need to know that You are our Lord. And Father, I pray that You would convict us, that You move us and do with us as You will today. We pray this in the Name of Jesus. Amen."

If you are a parent long enough, eventually you stop being your kid's heros... at least for a while. That's kind of the way it's supposed to be. I remember where I was whenever I saw the look on my oldest son's face... that he knew I was no longer perfect. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day; it was this year. We were driving in the car. I actually remember right where we were... at what street we were. I actually even know what stop light we were sitting at. On whatever radio station we were listening to, they did a thing about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. My son began to ask me some questions. He asked me if any of the people that I had grown up around... if any of them had been racist. "Yes, they were, son." "Did any of the people that you grew up around ever use some of those words that we hear about in school? Did you ever know anybody who used any of those words?" "Yeah... yeah, I did." "Well, dad... did you ever use any of those words?" [Pause] What are you supposed to do right then? Do you lie to your kid so that you'll keep being his hero? Or do you tell him the truth so that he'll know that you're not perfect, but he can see that Jesus has changed you, so then Jesus can be his hero?

You see, God has changed my heart and brought me a long way on this topic. I don't know... maybe He has brought you a long way on this topic as well. Then again... maybe you are right in the place that you have always been, be that good or bad. The thing that I want us to realize this morning is that I was changed on this topic... not because of politics, not because of philosophy, not because of after-school television specials. I was changed on this topic because of Jesus. That's who changed my heart on this. There are passages of Scripture in the New Testament... all through the Bible... that address this topic directly. I just had never seen them. So today, we are going to jump into some of those, and I want to show

you one of those specifically. We decided what we were going to preach on a long time ago. When we get to Ephesians 2:11-22... do you know what... there's a lot of things happening in our world right now that tell me that it is providential that we are brought to this passage today. So let me read it for us.

"Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, call 'the uncircumcision' by what is the 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. 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. 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."

1. From Separation (v. 12)

This passage is about the division between Jews and Gentiles. If you're like me, you tend to think about it in Sunday School terms. That doesn't really have any true punch. Well, Jew and Gentile, whenever you read that in Scripture, you need to understand... that's a racial issue. That's what it's about. Those are racial groups that had animosity toward one another. Certainly there were religious distinctions within that racial component, but still, at the same time, race played a key part in the division between those two groups of people. And Paul is addressing directly things like circumcision... this religious ritual that took place, that designated those who had been part of the Jewish community, apart from the Gentile community. And Paul is addressing the fact that Gentiles had not been circumcised and consequently were being marginalized by Jewish people. But here is the point... here today we need to recognize that this passage isn't the same for us, in some ways, because there isn't a massive division, Jew-Gentile, that's a big problem in the Church of Jesus Christ today. Most people who are Christians would say... "The Jews... those Jewish individuals... are God's people." They see that in the pages of Scripture. Yet, at the same time, we need to also recognize that if you are like me, whenever I would read this passage as a child or as a young adult, and I would see that we were to be unified... Gentiles unified with the Jews... I read that as, "Oh, yeah... people like me... white people." That's not what Gentile means though. It means anyone who is not Jewish.

You see, when Paul wrote this, he was talking about a particular type of division, but we have plenty of divisions today. The divisions today though are typically within the Gentile clan. The divisions tend to be racially drawn. You see, Paul is wanting us to understand that Christ has come to eradicate this line, but at the same time, the division still stands stark. I don't think I need to marshall any evidence for this claim, particularly if you have a Facebook page. You already know that this division is out there. Yet, nevertheless, my hunch is that right now as I'm talking about this, some of us are sitting in this room saying, "Why did I come to church today? I don't want to be here; I am really uncomfortable right now." In fact, some of us are sitting there right now and we're thinking, "I come to church to hear about Jesus. I don't come to church to hear about race." Well, here's the thing. Whenever you declare that Jesus is your Lord, your

boss, the One who oversees you... He gets to declare that He is Lord over every part of your life... your family, your job, but also your heart attitudes, your actions. That includes this topic as well. That's why we need to talk about this because we need to understand that the Lord Jesus actually directly addressed this through His Word, here in the Book of Ephesians.

Whenever Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, that was shocking. Why? Why was that shocking? ...Because Jesus crossed racial lines. Whenever Paul writes about the Church being racially diverse, that was shocking in the ancient world. Why? ...Because the ancient world, much like the modern world, had a problem with people mixing among racial lines. At the same time, in Acts chapter 2, whenever the Holy Spirit falls, why is that shocking whenever people begin to hear the Gospel in their language? ...Because, up until then, people understood that God had chosen one group of people to be His people. Now in Acts 2 we begin to see that everyone is hearing the Gospel in their language. It is intended for all people. You see, the Church, from its very inception, has been shattering the race barrier. But for whatever reason, it is still a massive hot-button issue in our country today, and it's something that as a church we need to talk about and understand. Why? ...Because God has a better dream for His Church.

2. To Peace (v. 14)

Now these truths that we are going to talk about today could be applied to pretty much any area of division, but we are going to look specifically at how they apply regarding race, in Ephesians chapter 2. You see, Paul says, "Look, you were divided... you were cast out." He is talking about the Gentiles with relationship to the Jew. He says that there is this natural enmity, this natural division that happens oftentimes among these racial barriers... these racial lines. But he says, "I want to now talk to you how God wants to take it from that place of division into a place of peace." I want to really walk through this entire passage, but I'm going to just focus in specifically on verses 14 through 16, because I want to draw your attention to a few key phrases in these verses.

Listen to Paul's argument. This is how he was explaining that God has destroyed racism. Verse 14: *"For He himself is our peace..."* Jesus Christ is our peace. What does that mean? Peace, in Hebrew, is "shalom." It's not the absence of conflict, but peace is actually "flourishing." It's when people are not only getting along but they are succeeding... they are moving forward. Things are going very well. He says, "In Jesus we have 'shalom'." It's this idea that things are flourishing. In Jesus, we have this. Why does this matter? ...Because Jesus, being our peace, it is His representation of God's attitude toward humanity. In other words, God's attitude toward people is that God wants all people to flourish. We see that because Jesus is our "shalom."

The next phrase: *"For He himself is our peace, who has made us both one..."* Why does this matter? Paul is doing a drive-by theology of the Incarnation... Jesus, being God in the flesh. This is his point: Jesus' racial-ethnic identity was Jewish. That's what it was. We know that historically. Jesus was Jewish. So, if you are not Jewish, then you are a different race than Jesus was. However, Paul is also saying that even though many of us are completely different, from a racial makeup, than Jesus was, God was not choosing one group of people, but He was choosing all people. So he is saying, "He is our peace..." So He is our "shalom" because He made us both one. Now he is talking about Jew and Gentile. Gentile doesn't just mean one group of people. It means all of the peoples of the world and the Jews, all were chosen together. So, in other words, in Jesus, God didn't just choose the Jews. God chose all people. So it wasn't about His ethnic-racial makeup. It was actually about the fact that He became human. When Jesus became

human, He didn't just choose Jewish men. He chose both men and women from all nations, all tribes, all tongues. It was His indication that He had said "Yes" to people everywhere.

How did He do that? Great question. *"For He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility..."* The Jewish historian Josephus has actually told us, through his writing, that the ancient Jewish temple was divided into various courts, through certain walls. But there was one particular wall, if you were a Gentile, you could not go past. It was the dividing wall. And that wall had an inscription on it in Hebrew that said, "If you are not Jewish and go past here, do not hold us accountable for the death that will follow." Translation: This isn't "Trespassers will be prosecuted." This is "Trespassers will be killed." There was a distinct division in the ancient world between the Jewish people and the Gentile people, and now Paul is saying that dividing wall that formerly existed between various racial groups has now been taken and absolutely eradicated. God has done a divine karate chop on the dividing wall of hostility and says, "No more. No more... from now on, all of us are one."

So He has broken down now this wall of hostility. Why does that matter? ...Because he is wanting you to understand, "If you have hostility in your heart toward another race..." Now I want to be very clear here. We're not talking about sinful activity. We're just talking about another group of people. If you have hostility in your heart toward another group of people because racially they are different from you... then that is to be destroyed, and God has destroyed it in Jesus Christ. He has absolutely crushed it.

So why does that matter? He says in verse 15: He did this *"...by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances..."* In other words, the religious acts don't matter as much. *"...that He might create in himself one new man in place of the two..."* So this is the radical statement. He says, "No longer is there Jew and Gentile, but now there is just one group of people." There's just one group of people. And how does that happen? He says, "There's one that has happened in one body." In one body... and what is the body? The Church. So these groups that used to be disparate and separated, the dividing wall of hostility has been destroyed, and now they have become one, and that one body is now the Church. There is no longer Jew or Gentile; there is just the Church. There is not Asian, Hispanic, Black, White... there's just "The Church." They are bound together in their faith in Jesus Christ.

How did this happen? Verse 16: *"...and might reconcile us both to God in one body, through the cross, thereby killing the hostility..."* The dividing wall of hostility that we talked about... how did God do His divine karate chop on that? His divine karate chop on that dividing wall of hostility was whenever the cross of Jesus Christ took place. Whenever Jesus was nailed to the cross, hostility between races was killed. Now I know that some of you are probably thinking... "Wait a minute. I thought that Jesus dying on the cross was simply to rid me of my sin." Yes, it was. And hostility between races is sin. If we have hostility in our hearts toward a group of people simply because of their skin color, simply because of their race... that is sinful, and it must be destroyed. And it has been destroyed in Jesus Christ. If you are here today and you would say, "I have an attitude of hostility in my heart toward a particular group of people..." or maybe toward several groups of people, simply because of their racial makeup... if that is you today, hear me. Jesus died to kill that hostility, so let Him kill it dead right now. He died to eradicate that. He died to kill it.

3. Into Growth (v. 21)

Now the reason that that matters is then not just so that the wall of hostility could come down but because God wanted to then take us from separation into peace and then into growth. He wanted to then grow something new and beautiful in its place. Mark DeYmaz, who has written more about the multi-ethnic

Church, I think, than anyone else out there, has an incredible sentence, and this is what it said: "God is not going to use the Church to fix the race problem in this country. God is going to use the race problem in this country to fix His Church."

It is common knowledge that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated time in our nation. But if the dividing wall of hostility has been destroyed in the cross of Jesus Christ, that therefore means that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning ought to be a time when people from all nationalities, all colors, all backgrounds gather together to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, because God has killed the hostility on the cross. Why do we tend to step away from that? A hundred different reasons... We're afraid... tradition... all kinds of histories of prejudice and actions that have gone on between all sorts of groups of people in this country. But God is not interested right now in fixing our country. Not that He doesn't want to fix it... He wants to fix it, but here's the thing. He is not interested in fixing the country first; He wants to fix His Church first. And the way that that happens is that the Church awakens and says, "We have a race problem in many of our churches." We need to address it and then the world... the country can look at us and say, "That's the way it ought to be." (Clapping) That's the way that it ought to be.

So Paul gives these three analogies. This is what he says. In verse 19... *"...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens..."* In other words, people of different races oftentimes claim their nationality or whatever country they're from first. We live in Houston. A lot of people from different countries move to Houston for a lot of work. This is the most ethnically diverse city in the United States, according to Rice University. People are here from all over the world. The thing is that we oftentimes use our national identity to be our primary identity. But instead, Paul is saying, "You are now fellow citizens of one country... the Kingdom of God." Let me translate that for you. Nationalism and tribalism oftentimes take precedent over any other claims of allegiance in many people's lives. But in the Church of Jesus Christ, tribalism and nationalism must take a backseat to our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. So whenever we declare that we are Kingdom citizens first, then that joins us together.

But he doesn't just stop there. He doesn't just say, "You're citizens of the same country" does he? He then goes on and he says, *"...you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."* "The household of God" You live together; you are people who are in the same family. I don't know about you. I've got a lot of crazy people in my family. I've got some nuts. But here's the thing: Family and friends are different. Friends start to bother you, and you just delete their number from your phone and move on. Right? Yeah... you're done. You trim the fat; that's it. But with family... they're there. Look around. God says, "You live in the same house with these people; this is your family." We would say, "We'd die for our family." People in this room that are a different color than you, that are a different background than you... they are your brothers and your sisters in Jesus Christ. We die for our family. Why? ...Because Jesus died for our family. We'd die for our family because we are now living in the same house. Some of you are saying, "I didn't pick these people." They didn't pick you either... (Laughter) ...but here you are. And we are all bound together.

3. To Growth (v. 21)

But he doesn't stop at the household either... verse 20: *"...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."* Look at verse 22: *"...In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."* A dwelling place for God, guys. Listen... what is Paul saying? When the dividing wall of hostility comes down between racial groups and we begin to grow into the thing that

God has intended, we become a place where God is living among us. And when people come in they go, "I've never been to a place like that before, because there is every nation, every tribe and tongue, represented in there, yet they love one another; there's harmony and peace. They have all kinds of different political ideas; they have all kinds of different ideas about business. But when they gather together, they have one thing that holds them... the Gospel of Jesus Christ... and they love one another like family in that place. And I feel God when I go in there." That's the way that it's supposed to be.

You see, in Revelation 21:3 we read about this picture of heaven that we're working toward, and it's every nation, every tribe, and every tongue there before God. In Revelation 21:3 we read, *"He will be their God, and they will be His people."* God will be the God, not just of the Jewish people in that day but of all peoples who have bowed the knee and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. In that moment, all peoples will be gathered together. The Church of Jesus Christ is to be a foretaste of, a looking-toward, heaven one day. When we come in here, we ought to see all peoples, all nations, all tribes. Why? ...Because we are supposed to look like heaven. We're supposed to look like heaven. When we do this, it will be a place where God dwells, and we will be the foretaste, the anticipation, the foreshadowing of heaven that God has intended us to be. And here's the thing: It's not just intended to be tolerating difference. It's not just, "Well, I'll go to that church even though there are people of different races there." It is, "I want to be a part of that church because I love my brothers and my sisters... even though they are different than me... because they have the Holy Spirit of Jesus in them." I want us to have a real love for one another.

How does this happen then? How do we do this? Here are some ideas:

1. We have to intentionally say that we want to be a multi-ethnic church. Only 14% of churches in the nation are multi-ethnic. By choosing to be mono-ethnic, we lose our ability to speak to the racial issues that are taking place in our country. If we want to speak prophetically to a people who need to hear from us, then we need to model that by living as people who are from all different backgrounds together in community. We need to choose to be just like that.

Pastor Steve Adrian over at HNW en Español... I don't know if you've ever gotten to talk to Pastor Adrian, but as we were starting that ministry a little over a year ago, I was talking to him about that and I said, "You know, I hope this is a blessing for you." He said, "Well, you know, brother... we have many things that we can learn from our white brothers and sisters." I said, "Oh... that's good." He said, "Yeah, you really teach us how to be organized." I was like, "That's the most spiritual thing that you've got? ...that we're organized?" But he thought that that was a great thing. He said, "Yes, you will teach us how to be organized, and we will teach you how to relax and to love." (Laughter) I think that was a complement... I'm not really sure. Here's the thing. Scripture is clear that if the dividing wall of hostility has been removed... guess what happens? God can use every racial group in our church to teach us things. They have treasures from their culture. We have treasures from our culture, and when we come together and share our treasures with one another, we can demonstrate things from our cultures that will make us live in a more rich, beautiful tapestry, and then we will be able to more greatly reflect the Kingdom of God. (Clapping) Yeah, we should clap for that; that's a beautiful truth. (Clapping)

Let me tell you another thing that we can do:

2. I want to challenge you... I don't care what color you are... I want to challenge you. Find somebody who is a different race than you this week... I want to say, find someone who

will let you have real awkward, ignorant racial conversations. Do you want to know the reason why we have a lot of racism in our country? ...Because we don't have understanding. And do you know why we don't have understanding? ...Because we don't talk to each other. We just hang out with people who look like us. We may go to the same mall or even worship in the same room together... but what happens is that we end up being divided, and because we don't have understanding, we make assumptions about one another.

Pastor Blake Wilson at Crossover Bible Fellowship has become one of my primary conversations. He has discovered just how ignorant I am about racial issues. I said, "Blake, look... I need a safe place where I can ask dumb questions... and don't make fun of me." And he said, "Okay." I have had hours of conversations with him where I just say, "Well, what about this, and what about that. I don't understand this. Why is it like this?" And all this kind of stuff. He will laugh at me a lot... but just a private laugh... and then he will give me answers. I will just give you an example. If you remember a year or two ago, whenever that whole Confederate flag thing was all over the news... I just called Blake and I said, "Hey... I've got to ask you a dumb question." He said, "Okay." I said, "Hey... does the Confederate flag offend black people?" He said, "Are you kidding me?" I was like, "Man... I don't know. I'm dumb. I'm just asking." And he said, "Well, tell me why." I said, "Well, Blake, I was raised in a town where half the people in town had a Confederate flag." And he goes, "Yeah... I wouldn't live in your town." (Laughter) But here's the thing. As we started talking about that and I started understanding his perspective on that, I had to ask some dumb questions so that he could give me some understanding. After that, I was then able to have some conversations with some of my white brothers and sisters who had a very different perspective than that. This was kind of their take on it. They said, "But I have the right, as an American, to display that. Then I was able to say, "I'm not talking about your first amendment constitutional right. I'm talking about, do you want to cause division and offense to someone you know is a brother in Christ? Do you want to hurt someone who you know is a sister in Christ? What is more important... your constitutional right or the Kingdom of God? (Clapping)."

We get to the Book of I Corinthians... and Paul says it... He says, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial." So we need to start saying, "What is it that I need to do so that I can best serve and love?" That's just one example. There's a hundred of those. I would challenge you, find conversation points with people where you can say, "Help me understand on these issues."

3. Another thing we can do is we can work, pray, serve, and worship together. Why do we worship with our brothers and sisters from Crossover? Why do we worship and pray with our brothers and sisters from HNW en Español? It's because we want to more faithfully understand that God has made all peoples in His image. Consequently we need, therefore, to strive to be a church that will receive and welcome all peoples. And whenever I worship with people who come from a different racial and ethnic background... do you know what happens? I begin to learn new ways to worship, and I begin to experience God in a more rich and powerful way than I ever have before. Whenever I do that, I begin to see them as my brothers and sisters rather than simply just a different group of people.
4. Let me give you another way. We have a lot of Life Groups right now. I think we've got about 40 that have started in the last few weeks. I want to speak primarily right now to my brothers and sisters who are in this room who are not white. Would you do me a favor? Here's the thing. We have become much more racially diverse in this gathering, and it

just... man... brings joy to my heart to see that. God is healing a wound in my life through God doing that work in this church. But let me say this: Would you be willing to take the risk and to join a Life Group? Most of our Life Groups are predominantly white. I know that. But here's the thing: They are going to have this conversation this week. We need your voice in that room. But we don't just need your voice in the racial conversation; we need your voice to help us learn how to follow Jesus in new ways, and how to be faithful to the Holy Spirit in new ways. Because Church is not just us gathering together in one room. You see, we don't actually have to really love one another in this room. I mean... if I don't like you, I just sit on the other side of the room. But when we get into small groups of ten people, I have to then learn how to love you like Jesus loves you and vice versa. That's good for us. That's what the Church is intended to be.

I pray that one day our church becomes so diverse in its ethnicity that all of our ministries have a multiplicity of ethnicities represented in the leadership, that our Life Groups are represented through various cultures in the way that they are lead, that our deacon body is diverse, that one day the elder council of Houston Northwest doesn't just look like a monochromatic picture but instead is a more accurate reflection and depiction of this city that we are attempting to reach. Those things will not happen overnight. I understand that. But I want to ask that we move toward them with diligence, with courage, with faith... seeking God to bring healing here among His peoples. God is not going to use the Church to heal the racial problem in our country; God is going to use the race problem in this country to heal His Church. Could we see our Church healed?

We need to respond to that today. Some of us need to repent. Some of us have some old attitudes. Some of us need to be courageous today. It's not that we're angry; we're just afraid. Some of us today need to get on our face before God and just pray and say, "God, show me what I need to do." Others of us need to take chances and have new conversations. I don't know what it is that you need to do today, but this is what I do know. God wants this church to reflect heaven. May we please receive the truth that He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, that He killed it on the cross of Jesus Christ. May we repent of any sin in our heart, and may we say, "God, in Houston as it is in heaven." Amen and Amen.

"Lord Jesus, we thank You. We thank You, God, that You want to make this Church Your Church... God, that You want us to reflect the things that You have for Your Church. God, we thank You that You are not done working on us. Lord, I am ashamed of who I was thirty years ago with respect to this topic, but Lord, I thank You that You were not done with me then, and Lord, I thank You that You are not done with me now. I'll probably be embarrassed at the opinions that I have today thirty years from now. You will probably grow me so much on this, Lord. Grow our church. Move us forward. Make us Your people so that we might be faithful in proclaiming and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We pray this, God, in Jesus' Name. Amen."