

# Session 3

## FINDING OUR WAY WITH RACIAL RECONCILIATION

*Ephesians 2:11-22*

### Memory Verse

*But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

– EPHESIANS 2:13, CSB



## Finding Our Way with Racial Reconciliation

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Christ reconciles humanity to Himself and to one another.

Jonah is one of the most tragic figures in the Bible. His life story centered on being coerced into loving a group of people from another country that had oppressed his people. But he was never happy about it, not even for a moment. To summarize, Jonah was called by God to go and preach repentance to the Ninevites, a people he hated. Knowing that if he preached, God was going to lead this people that he hated to repentance, Jonah ran the other way by boarding a boat to Tarshish. God then caused a storm at sea that was so strong that the lives of everyone on board were in danger. Jonah insisted that he be thrown overboard, knowing that his disobedience was the reason for the storm. Sure enough, the storm subsided and Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish only to be spat out on the shore three days later. Jonah went to Ninevah, preached a sermon, and watched as revival broke out so that the Ninevites were spared God's wrath. The next verse says:

*"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry."* (Jonah 4:1)

He was angry at God for His loving compassion and mercy. He was so mad at the mercy extended to the Ninevites that he prayed to die. Think about that. Jonah was so mad that God extended mercy to the Ninevites that he asked God to kill him. The decision to harbor hatred for others was toxic for Jonah. It is no less toxic for the church today. The pursuit of reconciliation as emissaries of the One who came to provide ultimate reconciliation is critical for avoiding and propagating a Jonah type of hatred.

**?** How does the story of Jonah impact you? What does holding bitterness do to the one called by God to preach repentance?

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**?** What signs can you look for in your own life to be aware of when bitterness and resentment are taking a foothold in your heart?

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**?** How would you communicate the importance of pursuing reconciliation to someone? What impact does reconciliation have on the temptation toward bitterness?

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In this week's session, Paul addressed the rift that existed in the Ephesian church between Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul's argument was based on the shared fundamental need both groups had for the forgiveness and grace only available through Jesus Christ. To that end, Paul contrasted the life of the Gentile believers before they were Christians with after they had become Christians. The implications for what their lives were to be like as followers of Christ hold pertinent application for all believers.

## **1. Christ Redefines Our Identity (Ephesians 2:11-13)**

The verses immediately prior to Ephesians 2:11, which Paul connected with "So then," highlighted the transformation that God affected in the lives of the believers; namely, they once were dead in the trespasses of the flesh and were made alive in Christ! In those verses (Ephesians 2:1-10), Paul freely used the inclusive qualifiers all and we to underscore the shared need for salvation among all humanity. The fact that verse 11 includes a stark shift of focus from everyone together to the Gentile believers specifically is significant. The abrupt change in focus was intentional in order to set up a well-used method of demarcation among the two groups.

In reminding the Gentile believers that they were once previously “Gentiles in the flesh,” Paul continued his use of “the flesh” as a way of referring that which was spiritually less. Previously, he had referred to the “fleshly desires” and “inclinations of our flesh” (verse 2:3) to communicate the carnal lusts that tempted and plagued the believers. Now, in speaking of circumcision, Paul emphasized the flesh and its temporary nature to describe that which divided the believers, though he “had now learned that circumcision in the flesh was religiously irrelevant,” according to F.F. Bruce.<sup>1</sup> What the Jews had historically used as a religious slur (“the uncircumcised”) in speaking of the Gentiles was, in actuality, a differentiation that meant nothing as it pertained to following Christ. Rather, it was the seal of the old covenant, which was executed by the hands of men.

**?** What are some things that you were known for in your life prior to being Christ-follower? How have you seen those things fade in their association with you as you’ve grown in Christ? What does that change in perception mean for you in the way you see others?

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**?** How does Paul’s treatment of “in the flesh” apply to the work of racial reconciliation? How does focusing on the spiritual and more significant factors of a person’s life help?

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Having established the diminished importance of circumcision—a difference in the flesh—under the new covenant in Christ’s blood, Paul moved to the hopeless position of the Gentiles prior to the atoning works of Christ. The list of privileges of the Jews was significant, as expressed by their contrasted reality with the Gentiles. The Gentiles were “without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.” That’s “without” a lot. The Gentiles were cut off and far from God. Paul’s repeated emphasis on the separation between the Gentiles and God would have escalated their sense of ostracism, making it a truly difficult for Paul’s audience to continue listening.

Suddenly, though, there was a change! “But now in Christ Jesus” was the turning point. It is difficult to communicate the incredible change in trajectory those five words represented for the Gentile believers. As Max Anders says, “God, because of his mercy and love, did not leave them in this hopeless condition. Christ abolished the distinction between Jew and Gentile. All people are now considered the same before God. His death on the cross made this wonderful thing possible.”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Christ the Peacemaker (Ephesians 2:14-17)

The blood of Christ affected both axes of relationship. Paul had just spoken of the impact on the vertical relationship—man’s relationship with God. Verse 14 began Paul’s explanation of the impact the blood of Christ on the horizontal axis—man’s relationship with others. Paul proclaimed that Christ is humanity’s peace; the reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles was made possible because both groups were united within the body of Christ. They shared the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They were, one and the same, called to be children of God. Only in Christ was such unity and peace possible.

Paul carefully explained how the blood of Christ had affected the hostility between Jews and Gentiles. First, the phrase “tore down the dividing wall of hostility” would have evoked thoughts of actual, physical barriers, such as the boundaries in the temple complex. Gentile proselytes who worshiped Yahweh were forbidden from advancing beyond the Court of the Gentiles in the Jewish custom. Therefore, even those who believed as the Jews believed were not allowed to enter with the Jews in the temple when it came to their worship practices. Second, the tearing down of the dividing partition hearkened believers back to the tearing of the temple veil that occurred during Christ’s crucifixion.

Paul gave clarification about the dividing wall of hostility in his explanation of the significance of Jesus’ life and death as it pertained to the law. Specifically, Jesus made irrelevant the “law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations.” This phrase is helpful because it is critical that one not read this verse as a complete dismissal of the Old Testament (Romans 3:31 makes this clear). Bruce says, “The law as a written code, threatening death instead of imparting life, is done away with in Christ. . . and when the law in that sense is done away with, the barrier between Jews and Gentiles is removed; Jewish particularism and Gentile exclusion are things of the past.”<sup>3</sup>

**?** Why is it incongruent with following Christ to exercise an attitude of superiority over people of any other race or background?

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**?** What walls of hostility has Christ broken down in your own life? How have you personally experienced that?

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The purpose of Christ’s atoning work, as Paul explained, was to provide reconciliation for both groups—Jew and Gentile—to God. The significance of that statement is the universal need of salvation for everyone. The Jews had a long history of being God’s people, but that did not mean every Jew was perfect or even believed in God. The power of Paul’s explanation was that it leveled the playing field, so to speak, for the Jews and Gentiles. They were all spiritually bankrupt apart from the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Precisely because everyone needed the exact same forgiveness, it was possible to unite them into one body based on what they shared instead of their comparatively petty differences.


To say it another way, Paul alluded to Isaiah 57:19. Both those who were far away from God (Gentiles) and those who were near (Jews) needed the peace of Christ to be reconciled to God. There were many differences, to be sure. Additionally, it would be foolish to diminish those differences, for in so doing one might lose sight of the significance of Christ’s atonement. The hostility between Jews and Gentiles was passionately hate-filled. The understanding that in Christ, all of that hostility could be transcended, under the guidance and presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, was nothing short of miraculous.

### **3. A Unified People for a Unified Purpose (Ephesians 2:18-22)**

Paul’s summary of verses 14-17, found in verse 18, pointed yet again to the unification of the Jews and Gentiles based on the shared Holy Spirit as their access to the Father. The trinitarian nature of this verse made it of particular importance. Bruce comments, “In Christ they have become members of his family, and when they address him by the family

name, 'Abba! Father!,' they give evidence of being indwelt by one and the same Spirit, the Spirit of God's Son (Gal. 4:6). Within this family the Father makes no distinction between those children who are Jewish by birth and those who are Gentile."<sup>4</sup>

Because that was so, the Gentiles that were integrating into a faith system with Jewish roots should have no fear of being viewed as outsiders or foreigners. Instead, they should expect to be received warmly, as not just peers, but family. There was no idea in Paul's writing of any acceptance of a second-class citizenry for Gentiles just because of their ethnic heritage. Their ethnic heritage was not what bought them entry into God's household. It was, as Peter described, "the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb" (1 Peter 1:19) that redeemed them and brought them into the family of God.

 What are some observable indicators that you would expect to see if someone were being treated as a second-class citizen because of their background? Can you give an example of a time when you saw that occur (not necessarily church-related)? How did you respond?

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 Why do you think Paul stressed so strongly and repeatedly the commonality of the believer's need for Christ?

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Paul shifted his analogy from a household to a building. In doing so, he equated both the Jews and the Gentiles as suitable building material for the building God is constructing. Christ Himself, the cornerstone, is the most important aspect of the building, giving stability and strength to the foundation and the building materials that would be erected on top of that foundation.

The image of the believers being constructed into a holy temple was a familiar one in Ephesus. The culture in Ephesus was extremely spiritual—almost entirely negatively. The landscape was littered with temples to numerous gods of black magic, occult, etc., but none so remarkable as the temple of the cult of Diana—the largest one in the world of its kind.

## Conclusion

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was one of his most theologically elegant and doctrinally precise. In navigating difficult racial disputes among believers, Paul repeatedly emphasized the commonality all people in both groups had with regard to salvation. His careful, straightforward instruction offers numerous points of application for believers today.

First, a relationship with Jesus Christ changes a person's identity. The beginning of Paul's argument for the unity of believers in Christ was grounded in the understanding that, as followers of Christ, believers were no longer what they once were. Having a relationship with Christ changes a person to be more like Christ. He was an agent of ultimate reconciliation, so believers are called to act in the same way.

Second, Christ as Lord tears down walls of hostility. Paul stated clearly that Christ came to reconcile and unify those who follow Him. When Christ reigns in a person's life, walls of hostility fall and reconciliation takes place, perhaps not instantly but inevitably.

Third, biblical reconciliation has commonality at its core. Specifically, it focuses on the universal need all humanity has for the grace of Jesus Christ as the way for salvation. That means admitting and confessing existing sinfulness, brokenness, and the lack of perfection. Doing so brings about needed humility.

Fourth, reconciliation knows nothing of second-class citizenship. Notice how careful Paul was to emphasize the equality that existed in Christ for both Jews and Gentiles. He spoke of them being fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household. Reconciliation can be an excruciatingly slow process, but it is never complete until any sense of division is eradicated.



**How comfortable are you in sharing your story of what your life was like before Christ and after Christ in gospel conversations? When you think about how you share that story, where do you see those moments when your new identity in Christ shine particularly brightly?**



**?** Where are some places you go where you feel like you don't fit in, aren't fully accepted, or have a second-class sort of citizenship? How does that impact your view of people there?

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**?** Why is approaching reconciliation from a perspective of commonality is important? How does the slow pace of reconciliation affect your efforts to see it through?

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**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Christ's blood is what unifies the people of God, regardless of ethnic background.

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** Believers of all backgrounds share a common identity as "fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household." That means that believers, understanding their new identity in Christ, must model the reconciliation that is only found in Christ in their relationships with other believers of all backgrounds.



# FOR NEXT WEEK

## True North: Finding Our Political Way

### Main Passages

- Romans 13:1-7

### Session Outline

1. The Only Source of True Authority (Romans 13:1-2)
2. Be Subject and Have No Fear (Romans 13:3-5)
3. Perform Your Civic Duty (Romans 13:6-7)

### Memorize

*But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

- Ephesians 2:13, CSB

### Daily Readings

- Monday - 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12
- Tuesday - 1 Peter 2:13-17
- Wednesday - Proverbs 21:1
- Thursday - Luke 20:20-26
- Friday - Titus 3:1-2
- Saturday - John 18:36

### References

<sup>1</sup>Bruce, F.F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984.

<sup>2</sup>Anders, Max. *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, & Colossians*. Holman New Testament Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.