

Peace-Making Grace: From Segregation to Reconciliation and From Hostility to Unity

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on May 29, 2011

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Ephesians 2:14-16 *For He Himself is our peace, who made both into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.*

Big idea: the gospel brings sinful men *to God*. It also brings saved sinful men *together*, Jew/Gentile/any in Christ. Last week we talked about Joshua (Heb *Yeshua*) in OT and our NT Yeshua (Jesus) fought the battle at Calvary and the walls came tumbling down:

- 1. The Circumcision Barrier (v. 11)**
- 2. The Covenant Barrier (v. 12-13)**
- 3. The Courtyard Barrier (v. 14)** [we studied these first 3 last week]
- 4. The Contempt Barrier (v. 15a)**
- 5. The Commandments Barrier (v. 15-16)**

Firstly, The Contempt Barrier (v. 15a)

Verse 15 begins saying Christ abolished the “enmity” or “hostility” (some translations put the word at the end of v. 14 as part of the wall, and we’ll come back to the mention of the Law in point #2). In this context, it is racist contempt, separation, segregation of the others, as we saw last week (literal walls keeping Gentiles separate from the Jews warning any who tried to worship with them they would die). Jews called non-Jews “un-circumcision” and “dogs.”

This Greek word “enmity” is translated “hatred” and “enemy” in other passages. Some rabbis even taught ‘hate your enemies’ (Mt 5:43). This Greek root is used of the devil in the NT (Lk 10:19), and those who will be consumed by fire in Revelation 11:5. This is how some Jews viewed their enemies, even 2 disciples of Jesus ask if fire from heaven can be called down on Samaritans (Lk 9:52-54)

I read if ‘a Jew even accidentally brushed against a Gentile in the crowded marketplace, he would have to immediately ceremonially cleanse himself. The Gentile community responded by saying the Jews were the devil incarnate.’¹ Even today, many in the Gentile Middle East Muslim world refer to Israel/the Jews as “the Satan.”

We need to begin again with the historical context and try and put ourselves in the shoes of 1st century Jews, or at least their sandals.

- Their very sandals they had been taught to shake the dust off when they had to walk through Gentile lands when they came back to Israel’s land, they didn’t want any pagan particles to come across the border. They would literally shake the dust off sandals and clothing to keep Gentile dirt off their “Holy Land”
- Because Samaritans were part Gentile, most Jews would go far out of their way to avoid traveling through Samaria (cf. John 4)

- For fear of contamination, many Jews would not enter a Gentile home or allow a Gentile to enter theirs (cf. Acts 10)
- If a young Jewish man or woman married a Gentile, their own families would have a funeral service, symbolizing the death of their child as far as religion, race, and relationship is concerned (story of my friend Avi, son of conservative rabbi, and Kitsane)
- Jonah couldn't handle the thought of non-Jews being saved
- Many Jews prayed daily thanking God they weren't Gentiles or women (cf. Mt 1, the gospel written to the Jews, reminds them Abraham's line included several Gentile women of faith!)
- Some Jews were taught this phrase growing up: "Crush the head of the best of snakes! Kill the best of Gentiles!" (Israel's Muslim neighbors today aren't the originators of that type of hatred and hostility, it has roots back to Bible times, *both ways* ... violent anti-Semitism existed long before Hitler and Hamas)
- Some Jews, called Zealots, literally did assassinate non-Israelis in Palestine (these were 1st century terrorists, one named Simon the Zealot is saved and changed from hate to love, becoming one of the 12 disciples of a Savior who transforms terrorists!)
- John MacArthur writes: 'Some Jews believed that God created the Gentiles to use as fuel for hell. Many believed that He loved Israel and hated every other nation ... some Jewish women refused to help a non-Jewish woman give birth, because to do so would make them responsible for bringing another despised Gentile into the world ... For many hundreds of years the animosity between Jew and Gentile had festered and grown. Although they were not always in open conflict, their mutual contempt continued to widen the gulf ...'²

The contempt and animosity went both ways. What about Greeks?

- Cicero (ancient Roman writer): "As the Greeks say, all men are divided into two classes—Greeks and barbarians." The Greek called any man a barbarian who could not speak Greek; and they despised him and put up the barriers against him.
- The Greek Aristotle talks of "the remote tribes of barbarians belonging to the bestial class." The most vital form of Greek religion excluded barbarians from worship with the Greeks.
- ...Plato said that the barbarians are "our enemies by nature."³

The Greeks thought they were wise and non-Greeks were foolish, which Paul alludes to in Romans 1:14 "*I am under obligation both to Greeks **and to barbarians**, both to **the wise and to the foolish.***"

Col. 3:11 says in Christ "*there is **no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian***"

Scythians were stereotyped and even made fun of in Greek plays and comedies for their uncouth ways of speech. Josephus (Jewish writer near NT times): 'they are little better than wild beasts.'⁴ But God is no respecter of persons, and regardless of how civilized or superior we think we are, the gospel levels the playing field, telling us we're all messed up, we're all foolish, we're all sinners, and we're all contemptible equally to a holy God who finds morally upstanding self-righteous people very offensive, as Jesus revealed. Jews who reject Christ and morally upright Americans who don't humbly submit their life to the Lordship of Jesus, are all enemies of God, spiritually dead and decaying (v.1), deserving wrath (v.3b)

But God, in v. 4, came to the rescue, regenerated us and reconciled us to Himself (v. 5-9), replacing fleshly confidence with faith (v. 8) in Christ alone, our only hope. But even that was not of ourselves; it's a gift (v. 9). God re-created us inside (v. 10), and our new heart can be reconciled to other sinners redeemed by the same grace. We no longer see them as different or distant (v. 12), but near (v. 13), the same, where it truly counts. This new heart exchanges fleshly categories for family categories (18-22): brothers, sisters in Christ.

We who trust in the same Savior are adopted into the same family with every believer (v. 19b) and have the same Father now (v. 18). The world says biology is most important, and "blood is thicker than water" ... but the blood of Christ runs deeper than that, and it brings former enemies near (v. 13) as blood-bought blood-brothers

It's not about race or religiosity, it's about grace, it's about Jesus, not our genealogy. The national and natural is superseded in Jesus by an unnatural supernatural multi-national multi-ethnic family of former enemies of God and each other worshipping Jesus in unity! God's plan from the beginning as we've seen in Genesis in our evening series is this: from the beginning God planned a humanity that would be fruitful and fill the earth in nations, a multiplicity of ethnicity that would overcome the hostility man has had since the tower of Babel separating mankind, the enmity man has had since Gen 3:15. The promised Savior-Messiah would bring his redeemed people back together in unity around the throne of the Lamb who was slain for every tribe, tongue, tone of skin, and type of person. God's plan from all eternity was to bring peace, *shalom*, harmony from hostility, a "new humanity" (end of v. 15) so that a glorious diversity of ethnicity would come together in unity around Jesus!

Christ "in His flesh" (v. 14-15 says) brought this wall of contempt down, teaching '*love your neighbor*' includes Samaritans/Gentiles, and '*You have heard it said...but I say to you love your enemies...*'

And He practiced what He preached, going into "enemy territory" to speak the peace of the gospel to a Samaritan woman and village. He heals a Samaritan leper, one doubly unclean to most Israelites. He tells the "Good Samaritan" story to show compassion in action, counter-cultural and cross-cultural charity instead of enmity. The story's hero is a Samaritan, loving a racist Jew, unexplainable by human standards, a love impossible apart from Christ within us, which is the point. Mere man can't do this; we need Christ (v.14)!

This isn't rooted in social justice, it's in the Savior. It's the fruit of the Spirit to have love, joy, and peace among former bitter enemies

And when Christ changes a heart in salvation, in regeneration, He can tell even His disciples who once wanted to call down fire on people in Samaria, Jesus tells them "*you will be my witnesses in Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). And the Jewish disciples did that, the Jewish church in the book of Acts rejoiced to hear of Samaritans also trusting Christ. Christian Jews loved those they were once taught to hate by peace-making grace. One black pastor said the history of Jew/Gentile enmity was even deeper enmity than American black-white enmity in the South. He said if the 1st century church could overcome this, that gives him great hope the American church can become like the NT

One 19th century scholar said this new unity of Christian Jew-Gentile church of the first century world ‘is is the greatest of all historical illustrations of the reconciling power of the gospel.’⁵

Final barrier Christ broke down: The Commandments Barrier

[end of v. 14 says Jesus] ... *broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,*¹⁵ *by abolishing in His flesh **the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances,** so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace,*¹⁶ *and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it **having put to death the enmity.***

If you have the ESV/NIV v. 14 says ‘*abolished the law...*’ Does that mean God’s Law is gone, no value/relevance for Christians?

Ephesians 5:31 *FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.* [Paul’s quoting Law/Torah to Christians]

6:2 HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (*which is the first commandment* [same Grk word as in 2:14] *with a promise*),³ *SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU ...*[quoting Law/Torah as abiding]

The same Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:8 “*we know the Law is good if one uses it properly/lawfully.*” Paul says “*the law is good*” in Rom. 7:16 and again in v. 22 he said he joyfully delights in God’s law in his inner man. He adds in v. 12 of Romans 7 “*the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*” Its value, he explains in 7:7 includes helping us know what is sin (coveting is an example our conscience doesn’t automatically know as sin). The Law also reveals God’s unchanging character, what pleases Him, what God is like, what we’re to be like and why (ex: be holy). The Law shows where we fall short, and for a Christian should point us to the cross, to the only One who could ever fully obey the Law.

So reading Paul in context cautions us against throwing out God’s Law from Eph 2:15, but let’s look at Jesus. “*In His flesh,*” i.e., when He came, did Jesus throw out or abolish the law?

Matthew 5:17:¹⁷ “***Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.***¹⁸ *For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot [or jot or tittle], will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*¹⁹ ***Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.***

Those who do God’s Law and commands and teach others them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says in v. 19. And then from there Jesus applies the Law in its intent (which the rabbis had wrongly narrowly limited). “*You shall not murder*” He actually gives them broader application to their anger in their heart. Jesus says heart anger/hatred is a serious enough sin to send someone to hell (v. 21-22). Did Jesus abolish that command at the cross, and now it’s ok to murder or angrily hate? Of course not.

In v. 27 Jesus quotes the Law: “*You shall not commit adultery.*” Is that abolished by Jesus on the cross so now adultery is ok? No. He doesn’t abolish the Law, Jesus actually amplifies and applies even further than they thought, in v. 28 including lust, heart adultery. He says lust, like anger, is a sin that can send someone to hell (v. 29)!

In v. 32, He applies the Law’s teaching on divorce. Did He abolish the Law on divorce? No, He showed it was even stronger than they thought! In 7:23 as He comes to the conclusion of this sermon, He says on judgment day God will say “*depart from me...you workers of lawlessness*” [literally, anti-nomians = against Law or those who think God’s Law doesn’t apply, cf. 1 John 3:4 “*sin is lawlessness*”)

But the Law can’t save. It was a tutor to point us to Christ, Paul says and explains we are not under OT law in the way OT Israel was, we are *under grace* (Rom. 6:1, but keep reading Rom. 6-8). Still the **moral law** of God is in effect, both Paul and Jesus taught. God’s moral character doesn’t change or moral/immoral standards. Jesus Himself later in Mt 23:23 spoke of “*weightier matters of the Law ... justice, mercy, faith*” (in contrast to tithes from spice rack).

It explains later in Matthew (as we read last week) that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn open from top to bottom, so *the whole sacrificial system* was forever abolished at the cross for Christians, the NT teaches, by a once-for-all sacrifice. All the priestly ceremonial laws were *fulfilled by High Priest Jesus* and that temple barrier between man and God and man and each other is gone. Jew and Gentile have equal direct access to God! It also says in Mark 7:19 when Jesus explained what we eat is not what makes us unclean “*thus He declared all foods clean.*” It’s not just sacrifices Jesus fulfilled.

Israel had laws for what they could and couldn’t eat in the OT, dietary laws and dress code laws, how to wear tassels, how to cut their beards, ceremonial as well as civil laws for living under a theocracy, 600+ commands in the Law, many making them separate/distinct from the Gentiles. Acts 10:1 *Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion [i.e., a Roman soldier commander] of what was called the Italian cohort, [or the Italian Battalion] ...*

Cornelius is a God-fearing Gentile believer in God (v. 2) and as he prays, the Lord tells him to go the house of Simon-Peter (v. 3-6) and so he goes. At the same time Peter receives a vision from God (v. 11-12) of animals considered unclean in OT Law, coming down on a sheet like a great big picnic. Not very kosher!

¹³ *A voice came to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!”* ¹⁴ *But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.”* ¹⁵ *Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”* ¹⁶ *This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.*

... ¹⁹ *While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you.”* ²⁰ *“But get up, go downstairs and **accompany them without misgivings** ...*

... ²³ *So he **invited them in and gave them lodging** [Gentiles?!].*

... ²⁸ *And he said to them, “You yourselves know **how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner [or alien] or to visit him; but God** has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.*

... ³⁴ Opening his mouth, Peter said: **“I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.** ³⁶ **“The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, *preaching peace through Jesus Christ* [that’s language out of Ephesians 2]**

... ⁴³ **“Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name *everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.*”** ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ **All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.** ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. [probably the Hebrew tongue they’d never learned]

And since they had the same Spirit, Peter gives them the same baptism. This is huge: non-Jews fully accepted w/out circumcision, God’s Spirit saving, indwelling them at the moment of faith!

11:2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, **those who were circumcised took issue with him, ³ saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”** ⁴ But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence ...

...¹³ he [Cornelius] reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; ¹⁴ and he will speak **words to you by which you will be saved,** you and all your household.’

¹⁵ “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell **upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning ...** ¹⁷ “Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after **believing in the Lord Jesus Christ,** who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down **and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”**

²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene [Africa], who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and **a large number who believed turned to the Lord.** ²² The news about them reached **the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch** [Syria, today we would call them Arabs]. ²³ Then when he arrived and witnessed **the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all ...**

v. 25-26 say Saul and Barnabas spent a year helping establish the church in Antioch/Syria, these “Arab Christians,” and end of v. 26 says this is where believers were first called “Christians.”

13:1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene ...

His African origin is emphasized and Simeon also has something emphasized about him – that he was called “black” or “dark,” which most modern commentators think signifies black skin, ex: John Stott, F.F. Bruce, Ben Witherington, etc. v. 1 also explains Manean grew up in the household of Herod, the hated homicidal genocidal Jew-baby-killing King, someone from his family/house is saved and is a leader among the first Christians

Daniel Hays, in his excellent book *From Every People and Nation*: ‘Luke has been concerned throughout his two-volume work [Luke-Acts] to present the people of God as multi-ethnic and diverse. So it is significant that Luke provides additional distinguishing information for the middle three names [all except Barnabas/Saul] beyond the mere citation of their names ... the point appears to be that these leaders were culturally and socio-economically diverse ... The mention of a Black African as a leader in the Church in Antioch certainly has theological significance for Luke. Recall that in Acts 8 Luke provides a substantial discussion and description of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was also Black ... a Black African is now cited as one of the central leaders in the new, burgeoning Church in Antioch. So Luke shows clearly that not only is the gospel to go to all peoples... but also that all people, including Black Africans, are to be integrally included into the Church, the new people of God ... the multi-ethnic aspect of the early Church extended to leadership and not just membership ... Blacks were involved in the Christian Church ... from the very beginning [where Christianity was even first called Christian] ...

Luke reminds the church today that the gospel demands we forsake our inherited culturally driven [thinking], and accept all people ... as integral parts of the Church. The demolishing of racial barriers within the Church is a task in which the Spirit leads us ... The gospel therefore challenges each of us to do some serious Spirit-led soul-searching on this issue: Do our attitudes and actions towards those who are ethnically different reflect the prejudiced culture that we inherited, or do they reflect the new worldview of racial acceptance that the gospel proclaims and Spirit empowers?’⁶

In v. 38 Paul preaches: “*Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,* ³⁹ *and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.*

... ⁴⁷ *“For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.’ ”* ⁴⁸ *When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed [the elect believed]*

Now turn to Acts 15. Not all Jews were excited about this trend:

¹ *Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”* ² *And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders ...* ⁵ *But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”* ⁶ *The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.* ⁷ *After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.* ⁸ *“And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;”* ⁹ *and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.* ¹⁰ *“Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”* ¹¹ *“But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”*

As amazing as God's reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the 1st century, there is an even more amazing reconciliation: Christ reconciling the world (all classes of people, all believers) to God. Our greatest problem wasn't human, it was God. Our problem was not merely horizontal/earthly, it was vertical/heavenly, as enemies of the God who made us, whether we realized it or not, before we knew the Prince of Peace (Jesus) as Lord, we were at war with God

But the good news of Romans 5:10: "...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.¹¹ And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Like King David did for a former enemy named Mephibosheth, by grace (*khesed* in Hebrew OT), once his enemy was now seated at his table, and treated fully and equally as a child of the King! That kind of thing didn't happen, you were supposed to wipe out all the surviving remnants of rival past dynasties, not bring them into the house with you and treat them like royalty, like your own son! But that's what David did and the greater Son of David Jesus Christ did that and more for us who were naturally enemies of the King of the Universe, deserving only His wrath and hostility to us (in Eph 2:3)

Jesus the Good Shepherd not only prepares a table in the presence of His former enemies, He prepares a table former human enemies of each other can reunite around in worship and fellowship because Christ put to death their enmity, replacing it with amity and unity. This was an astonishing jaw-dropping scene in the 1st century A.D., to walk into a church and see how saved Jews and Gentiles loved each other in a way that had no human explanation.

In their enmity and hostility, Jews and Gentiles wanted to kill each other at times, but in v. 16b, Christ kills the enmity, the hostility, and instead there is humility and harmony and true community as Jew and Gentile embraced each other each Lord's Day and greeted one another with a kiss of love. If God could reconcile them in the light of their historical context, brothers and sisters, there is no issue you have with a fellow believer that Christ cannot reconcile, if we will humble ourselves in light of the gospel of peace-making grace and do what Christ calls us to (Mk 11:25, Mt 5:23-24, etc.)

¹Courson, J. (2003). *Jon Courson's Application Commentary* (1235). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

² John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 69-70.

³ *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000), 113.

⁴ As cited by J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (NSBT series, IVP, 2003), p. 189.

⁵ H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, CBSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1888), 75.

⁶ Hays, 178-79.