

“Christ our Peace”
Ephesians 2:11-22
November 11, 2001

Text Comment

We considered vv. 11-13 last Lord’s Day morning and, in particular, Paul’s account of the situation of man in unbelief as he gives it in v. 12. Today we take up the central theme of this paragraph, namely God’s reconciliation in both its vertical and horizontal dimensions, that peace that Christ establishes both between God and believers and between believers, one with another.

This is a paragraph, like many others in Ephesians, which tempts the preacher to slow down and preach on each sentence, even each phrase, and, in certain places, even on single words. But, I will resist that temptation and try to set before us the gist, the main thrust of Paul’s argument.

- v.14 The “two” are, of course, Jew and Gentile. And, there *was* hostility between them, deep and abiding hostility. Paul spoke from his own experience. And, as he is going to say, what fed that hostility was the exclusiveness of Judaism, their customs and self-consciousness as a people apart, God’s true and only people, an exclusiveness that led Jews to regard Gentiles as inferiors, even as the unclean, which viewpoint, in turn, produced a mutual animosity toward the Jews on the part of the Gentiles, who resented the Jewish view of them and who, on their part, considered the Jewish religion and way of life strange, even bizarre, and offensive in various ways. As one commentator puts it, “This lively mutual animosity was one of the uglier elements in the Greco-Roman world.” [Lincoln, *WBC*, 142]
- v.16 This is one of the more difficult statements that the Apostle Paul makes in his letters. It has been taken, as some other of his statements have been taken, to suggest that Paul meant that Christ did away with the law, the regulations concerning ceremonies, of course, but the entire law, including the ten commandments. Many have taken remarks such as Paul made here as meaning that now, in the new epoch, Christians are past obeying commandments. The principle of love has made the principle of obedience obsolete. That viewpoint has always had its advocates, but it is clearly an impossible interpretation. It is not only that Paul raises that interpretation as a possible understanding of his viewpoint and categorically rejects it – “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather we uphold the law.” (Rom. 3:31; and there are many such statements in Paul – but, even here in Ephesians, for example in 6:2, he refers to the law, even explicitly to one of the ten commandments, and speaks of its abiding authority in the Christian’s life. “Honor your father and mother’ which is the first commandment with a promise – ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” In Paul’s theology the law retains its force and authority in the Christian life as a rule for our behavior. The law, as it has been said, “is love’s eyes.” “If you love me,” Jesus said, “you will keep my commandments.” The law shows us how to love God and our neighbor. Paul taught the same. But, if so, what does he mean here?

Comparing Ephesians 2:15-16 with its parallel in Colossians 2:13-17 it appears that Paul has compacted a great deal of thought into this short statement here. Christ, by his death

on the cross, did away with the curse of the law – becoming a curse for us, as Paul says elsewhere –, by which he reconciled these sinners to a holy God, but he also did away with the law in a certain sense, did away with the regulations of Jewish religious life *insofar as they placed a barrier between Jew and Gentile*. Remember, only a few of those laws actually did that. Most of Judaism’s regulations that held Gentiles at arm’s length were rabbinical innovations, not the laws of the OT, but some of those Mosaic laws had to be changed in form to bring the Gentiles into the church without prejudice and make them, *as Gentiles*, members in completely good standing. The cross, in other words, also brought an end to a particular era in the history of salvation, that era in which the church was confined almost exclusively within the borders of Israel. In Colossians Paul makes explicit mention of the laws of clean and unclean food – laws that the Lord Jesus himself had already pronounced ready to be discarded in the new situation – and the laws governing the observance of various religious festivals of the Jewish calendar. These were all things that had a temporary and revelatory purpose and things that were reformed and reshaped in the new epoch in large part in order to clear the way for Gentiles to enter the church and participate fully in its life and worship *as Gentiles!* Both of these things – the reconciliation of sinners to a holy God and the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles – were, then, the fruit of the cross: the reconciliation of sinners to God and the reconciliation of Jews to Gentiles.

- v.22 As repeatedly in the Bible, our vision of salvation is lifted up beyond our own and individual redemption and renewal to its corporate dimension, to our being taken up into the body of Christ, being made a living part of something far larger than ourselves, a living temple in which God dwells by his Spirit. Christianity has a individual and private dimension, but it never ends there. No biblical Christian can live apart from the body of Christ or fulfill God’s purposes in his or her life without being a contributor to the life and ministry of that body. We are saved to be a part of the Church, saved to be a part of the community, saved to participate in the life, worship, and ministry of the house of God.

Remember now, where we are in Ephesians. Paul had said, in chapter 1, vv. 17-19, that he desired for these Christians to appreciate to a still greater degree “the riches of God’s glorious inheritance in the saints and his incomparably great power for us who believe...” In chapter 2 he has been expounding their salvation in its nature and its history precisely so as to demonstrate to them these riches and this incomparable power. We are still in the midst of that demonstration in the paragraph we read this morning. They were dead, God made them alive and not made them alive only, but sat them down with Christ in the heavenly realms. Now, in other terms, he makes the same point again. They were excluded from citizenship in Israel, without hope, and without God and now, they who were once far away, have been brought near through the blood of Christ, brought into the very household of God. Those who not so long ago were *without God* are now being built together to become a dwelling in which *God lives* by his Spirit. These are riches and this was power beyond our ability to comprehend!

And this is no ordinary knowledge. This is not like the knowledge of the sciences or history, knowledge that an unbeliever can obtain as well as a believer. This is knowledge of the heart,

the force of truth in the soul. It requires the illumination and the persuasion of the Holy Spirit. That is why Paul began with prayer.

That is true, of course, of the nature of salvation itself. The world looks at all that Paul has said in chapter 2 and yawns. Unbelievers do not feel the flames of hell licking at their feet, they have no sense that they are without God and that they are without hope. They do not believe, they hardly know what we might mean when we say that they are dead in transgressions and sins. Dead, lifeless, blind, deaf, paralyzed. They don't think of themselves that way and for that reason they have no understanding of the incomparably great power of God that makes dead sinners alive in Christ. And as it is true in our day, so it was true in Paul's day. The Jews didn't have this knowledge about themselves, by and large, and the Gentiles didn't either. In this fundamental respect, at this central point they were the same. However much they may have thought themselves better than the other, in fact they were both equally dead and equally unaware of the fact.

Men and women can be made to stand in awe at the demonstration of great power: the eruption of a volcano, the winds of a hurricane, the thunder of a great storm, the shaking of an earthquake. Many of you remember how dramatic was your experience of our most recent earthquake. But the power of God that raises the dead is simply beyond them. They cannot see it or understand it or appreciate it. They stand hushed before the power of God that they can see, but they are completely oblivious to the far greater power all around them that they cannot see, that power that God displays when he makes the dead in sin to live in Christ.

A professor of mine, the late Dr. John Sanderson, used to tell a story of his youth. When a boy he was taken with his classmates to the zoo. They visited the tortoises. The guide said, "Children, some of these tortoises are very old. Some were alive before the signing of the Declaration of Independence." "And do you know what we did?" Dr. Sanderson asked. "We whispered." Well, that is what Paul is after in our hearts. He wants us to realize that in the matter of our own salvation, if we truly understand what has happened and what had to be done and what incomparably great power had to be exercised to make us alive again, to give us peace with God, *we would be dumbstruck*, we would whisper about it all because it would seem so amazing, so sacred, so awe inspiring. You can't be chatty in the presence of something so breathtaking.

Well, another way of reckoning with the greatness of this salvation is to consider its effects: not only does it make the dead alive, but it brings peace, peace between God and rebellious sinners, and peace between human beings, even between those who are most profoundly alienated from one another. You have both dimensions of this peace here. We who were far away from God have been brought near to him, have access to him, are now members of his household and family, being built up into a temple in which God himself lives by his Spirit.

But that reconciliation to God has been granted to Jew and Gentile alike. In the world of that day there were many deep divisions between people. There was a great deal of bitter alienation and hatred. And everywhere in the Gospel, the power of divine grace to heal, even to annihilate, those divisions is celebrated. The most notorious one, that between Jew and Gentile, was abolished by Christ and his apostles so that Paul could even say, to rhetorical effect, in the Christian church, there was neither Jew nor Gentile, just as there was neither man nor woman,

slave nor free, rich nor poor. They all had stood on equal footing as dead sinners before a holy and righteous God and, by faith in Christ, they now stood on equal footing as sinners saved by grace. Compared to this, nothing that might have distinguished them from one another mattered at all. Compared to peace with God and membership in his household, that which they shared by faith in Christ, the other things were utterly irrelevant.

Many of you have read the justly famous Bible commentary of Matthew Henry. Matthew Henry's father, Philip, was also a great man, a faithful preacher. When Philip was a young man he fell in love with a young woman of a much higher class, a much more prestigious family. In the England of the 17th and 18th centuries, class distinctions, distinctions based on birth, on wealth, on social status, were much more profound than they are today, and, don't kid yourself, they remain pretty profound in our own day and in our own American culture. Well, this young woman's parents were not happy. She loved Philip as much as he loved her and wanted to marry him. And, of course, in those days the consent of one's parents was virtually required to proceed with a wedding. Her parents said to her, "This man, this Philip Henry, where has he come from?" The spunky Christian girl replied, "I do not know where he has come from, but I know where he is going!" That is the point. What do these human distinctions matter, these differences that seem so important to so many, in comparison to what two Christians share: the life of God in our souls and the hope of heaven, membership in God's household and a life to live for him. How gloriously this is illustrated in the New Testament. In the Lord's own ministry he called together into a loving community the most disparate people, people who otherwise would have had *nothing* to do with one another: despised prostitutes, hated tax collectors, Roman soldiers in Judea if you can believe it, Jewish priests, and, later, masters and slaves, cultivated and wealthy Jewish women, Athenian philosophers, Gentile jailers and business women. An altogether motley crew made into a family by their equal share of their original hopelessness and God's grace and power that delivered them from death to life. If you share that, what do, what can your differences amount to, really?

This peace, uniting men and women to God and one another, this peace that God *alone* gives and can give is a powerful, wonderful thing. The world does not know it, not really. It has an ill-defined longing for it, but it cannot find it. Christians who have been Christians for a long time often take it for granted, but those who become Christians in the middle of life discover this peace as something powerful and amazing.

I think of J.C. Ryle, the great evangelical Anglican bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century, whose books are still in print and still read with great appreciation by spiritually minded people today. I thought of Ryle because he became a Christian simply listening in church one day to the reading of Ephesians chapter 2. It wasn't the sermon, he later couldn't remember anything about the sermon. It wasn't the preacher. He couldn't even remember who it was who read the lesson in the worship service, but it was the reading of this chapter, hearing Paul's great words about salvation by grace through faith that made Ryle a Christian.

He suddenly discovered that many of his old friends did not like him much any more, but that he was finding new friends everywhere, and not friends only, but brethren. He called it "a kind of immediate freemasonry" by which he meant not that freemasonry was a good thing but that the church was like freemasonry in this respect: it was a society of people who knew things that

others did not know, who had access to secrets, to an insider's acquaintance with things that an outsider knew nothing about. You know how it is in a family. There are secrets, things only the family members know. Something is said and all the members of the family immediately understand, but an outsider would not. So it is in the Christian church, which is a family, as Ryle discovered. And inside this family he found love and acceptance and mutual respect and regard.

Do you remember that remarkable passage in Isaiah 57 where the Lord speaks about peace, the peace that he gives and the peace that the world seeks but never finds.

“I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace to those far and near, says the Lord... But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.”

And so it is. Our world lacks peace and human beings in its lack peace. What happened on September 11th is only a more dramatic example of what is happening everywhere in the world all the time. Not just nations and peoples at war and filled with hatred, but husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees. Have you been following the stories of the angry mobs of fire-fighters in New York City, turning on the police because they were forbidden in sufficient numbers to visit the ruins of the World Trade Center, turning on their own union chief on account of past grievances, raining down on him a chorus of “boos” at a recent star-studded musical gala held and televised to raise money for the victims of the terrorist strikes. But what is new in that? Every newspaper, virtually on every page, tells the story of man's alienation from man, of hatred, of disquiet, of fear. Human life in this world, is just as the Lord said through Isaiah: it is like the tossing sea that is constantly casting up mire and mud. Ever since Adam listened to Eve and disobeyed God, ever since they listened to another voice and became subject to another power, human life has been characterized by restlessness and conflict, by jealousy and envy, by hatred and alienation. That is always there, the tossing sea, the waves. But, then, as on September 11th and since the storms come and the antagonisms that lie between and among human beings are made more violent and litter the beaches of human life with the detritus, the debris of human discord.

And, what you see in human relationships is simply an expression of the alienation, the disease, the discord, that lies within the individual heart in regard to itself. Place a cow in clover and it is content. Place a man in a material paradise and he is content only for a little while and, probably, not really content even for that short while. Then the alienation from God and from the true purpose of his life begins to express itself once more and that, in turn, expresses itself in discord between himself and others. That is why these two dimensions of peace are always discussed together, because they originate in the same spiritual reality and feed on one another. There is no peace with God that does not create peace between men and, in the same way, there is no want of peace in the human heart that does not express itself in troubled relationships with other people.

Now, my brothers and sisters, these are the facts of the matter. By the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ we have been brought into peace with God and with one another. We share not only a common fate apart from God's grace, but we share a common experience of God's

love and a common inheritance in heaven. We are drawn together by a bond so powerful that only the Triune God could forge it! Vv. 11-22 are all in the indicative, they are an account of what *is*! There isn't an imperative in the entire paragraph.

But, if we know this truth and feel the wonder of it, as Paul prays that we shall, then we must practice it and live it out as well. We must do honor to a Savior as great as the Son of God and a salvation as great as this that has made us alive and lifted us up to heaven and gathered us into God's family and formed us into his holy temple. These are favors of which not a one of us is remotely worthy or ever could have been remotely worthy. And they are favors that ought to be felt most wonderfully in our daily life. But, in the Christian life, we have an obligation to practice our faith, to put into motion the forces that are now alive and at work in our hearts and lives.

You struggle with fears and with alienation and with antagonisms and with disquiet in your heart. Do you not? And do not some of you struggle mightily with these things? Well, you have peace with God. Tell me now, make the argument if you can. What possible reason for fear or for disquiet do you have that stands up to this? God has brought you near to himself, he has made peace with you when you were far away. He has brought you into his family, his very household. He is building you, your very self, into that holy temple in which he dwells by his Spirit. He has set you, already, he has set you in the heavenly realms with Christ Jesus. He has made you a citizen of heaven.

Now, you tell me, *in view of all of that wonder, all of that marvel, all of that extraordinary privilege, in view of that great love of God the Father pitched on you and that great sacrifice made for you and your salvation by God the Son*, what is there in your life that you should be fearful of, what is there that should fill your heart with unease, with disquiet, what is there, what can there possibly be, that should fill your heart with antagonism or a sense of alienation? Tell me if you can. Start the sentence in your mind and heart right now! God has brought you near to himself. If God is for you, who can be against you? If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? If the Son shed his blood to make you his own brother or sister, what can there conceivably be in your life sufficient to make you feel that things are not right, not well, that you are not safe and secure, that your situation is not beautiful beyond words? Tell me. You cannot tell me; you now you cannot. If you have Christian blood in your veins you would be mortified even to attempt to begin the sentence.

And, in a similar way, think of what attitudes so often are found in your heart toward other believers and how often you let differences between yourselves become barriers between yourselves. Tell me, make the argument if you can. What possible reason, what possible difference that keeps you apart from another Christian man or woman, boy or girl, can stand up to this: that God has by the blood of his own Son broken down the dividing wall of hostility so completely that even age-old enemies and ancient hostilities, such as existed between Jews and Gentiles, simply evaporated, disappeared.

In view of that mighty reconciliation, in view of the peace that Christ established by his blood, in view of the fact that you have in common with every believer – no matter how different he or she

may be in certain worldly ways – both your terrible need as dead sinners and your glorious salvation, that you were both made alive by the blood of Christ, you both, though once far way, were drawn together into God’s family and are both being built into that holy temple in which God will dwell by his Holy Spirit; I say, in view of that, what is there that should cause you to look down your nose at your brother or sister? You were separate from God and others, but now you have been made God’s child and the brother or sister of every other Christian. What is there in your life or the life of that other believer that should keep you apart as if you were not brethren, as if Christ, by the sacrifice of himself had not abolished the distance between you? What could conceivably keep you apart, keep you at odds with someone whom the Father loved as he loved you, whom the Son sacrificed himself for as he sacrificed himself for you, whom the Holy Spirit dwells within as he dwells within you? Tell me if you can. You know you cannot.

There is nothing, of course, there is nothing. We read this text and we know for a certainty how we must live, how any Christian will live who wants his life or her life to be lived in holy consistency with God’s grace and God’s purpose.

It is a beautiful thing not only to know that it is right and good, but also to feel in oneself the strength, the knowledge, the understanding, the inspiration by which one will all his or her life long aspire to live in the peace of God, both before him and before others. Brought near by the blood of Christ! Surely that stupendous fact ought to dominate our lives in very obvious ways.

Carlos Fuentes, the contemporary Mexican novelist, and certainly no friend of the Spanish conquest or of Christianity itself, nevertheless writes: “One can only imagine the astonishment of the hundreds and thousands of Indians who asked for baptism as they came to realize that they were being asked to adore a God who sacrificed himself for men instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves to gods, as the Aztec religion demanded.” [Cited in *First Things* (May 1999) 37]

Precisely. And those of us who know of that sacrifice God made ought to be the most eager and determined to pay homage to it by practicing in our lives the very effect for which the Savior’s blood was shed: peace with God and with one another.