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## RECONCILED RELATIONSHIPS

Ephesians 2:14-18

By

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Ephesians Lesson 17

## Reconciled Relationships Ephesians 2:14-18

Two stories in the Bible evoke strong feelings in me every time I read them. One is the story of Joseph and his brothers. The other is Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The reason that these stories often cause tears to well up in my eyes is that they are stories of reconciled relationships.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, treats them kindly, and forgives them for the terrible thing that they had done in selling him into slavery, it is a moving testimony to the power of reconciled relationships. Later, when their father has died, the brothers fear that Joseph would inflict revenge that he had been withholding. But Joseph wept and treated them kindly because he recognized God's sovereign purpose in what had happened.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the young man impudently rejected the love of his father and chose instead the company of his fast-living, fickle friends. The father's broken heart longed for the return of his wayward son. When he finally saw him coming in the distance, the father felt compassion for him, ran to him, embraced him, kissed him, and joyously welcomed him back into the family. That powerful story shows the tremendous joy both of reconciled human relationships and also of sinners being reconciled to the heavenly Father.

God created us to have close, personal relationships with Him and with one another. Jesus said that the greatest commandment in the Law is to love God with our entire being. The second greatest is that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). Those are both relational commandments. But when sin entered the human race, it alienated Adam and Eve from God and from one another. They tried to hide from the presence of God and then Adam blamed God and Eve for his own sin (Gen. 3:8, 12). Sin always causes alienation towards God and between people.

And so the great problem of the human race is, how can we be reconciled to a holy God from whom we are estranged because

of our sin and rebellion? And, how can we be reconciled to one another? We need peace between nations in this war-torn world. We need peace in our communities. We need peace in our churches, which are supposed to be models of Christ's love, but often are marked by division and strife. And, we need peace in our immediate and extended families. But, how?

Paul addresses this vital subject in our text. The logical way to deal with the topic would be to start with reconciliation with God and then go on to reconciliation on the human level. Being at peace with God is the foundation for peace with others.

But Paul begins here with peace between formerly alienated people (2:14-15) and then goes to the underlying cause of this reconciliation, namely, reconciliation between those groups and God (2:16-18). Perhaps his heart was burdened with the very real danger of the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church splitting into factions. So he begins with the problem at hand and then goes deeper to the foundational reconciliation with God that results in reconciliation between formerly hostile groups. He is saying,

Through the cross, Christ reconciled us all  
to one another and to God.

It's easy to discern Paul's theme here. He uses the word "peace" four times (2:14, 15, 17 [twice]). He talks about Christ making the two groups into one, breaking down the wall between them, and creating the two into one new man. He mentions twice that Christ removed the enmity and that He reconciled the two groups into one body, so that they both have common access to the Father through the one Spirit. Reconciliation is his theme.

1. Through the cross, Christ reconciled us all to one another (2:14-15).

Paul has just rehearsed the sad plight of the Gentiles before Christ (2:11-12). They were separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. While the Jews were God's chosen people because of His grace alone, not because of anything meritorious in them, they had become proud and had developed an intense hatred for the Gentiles. They viewed them as uncircumcised dogs. They shook the dust off their feet

after traveling in Gentile territory before coming back to the Holy Land, so as not to defile the land. They would never eat with a Gentile. Even Gentile converts to Judaism had to keep their distance in the temple.

We cannot begin to understand the radical nature of what Paul proclaims here unless we keep in mind this centuries-long hostility that had existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. We might compare it to the divide between whites and blacks in the South in our country, or to the conflict between the Shiite and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East. Paul is making the radical assertion that Christ has erased these centuries of racial hatred. So it is vital for the local church to display the peace of Christ in order to glorify Him before a world that only knows strife and conflict. Note three things from these verses:

- A. Apart from the cross, there is deep alienation between those from different backgrounds.

The source of the hostility between the Jews and Gentiles was sinful pride. Pride is at the heart of all racism and all sin. Satan appealed to the pride of Adam and Eve by tempting them to think that they knew better than God what was good for them. Cain proudly thought that his sacrifice to God was better than his brother's sacrifice. When God rejected Cain's sacrifice, he grew angry and murdered his brother. His root sin was pride.

Paul pictured the alienation between the Jews and Gentiles in his day as "the barrier of the dividing wall." He was probably referring to a four-foot wall in the temple precincts that divided the Court of the Gentiles from where the rest of the Jews could worship. On this wall were inscriptions that have been discovered by archaeologists, which warn that if a Gentile goes beyond the barrier, he will have himself to blame for his death which follows. If Paul was writing to the Ephesians from his imprisonment in Rome, they probably would have known about this barrier, even if they had never visited Jerusalem, because the incident that had led to Paul's imprisonment involved one of their men. Paul was in the temple when a mob falsely accused him of bringing Trophimus, an Ephesian Gentile, beyond the barrier (Acts 21:27-36). This led to a riot, which led to Paul's imprisonment. This barrier in the temple symbolized the deep hostilities between the Jews and the Gentiles.

At the root of those hostilities was religious and ethnic pride on the part of the Jews.

Pride and selfishness account for everything from wars between nations to conflicts in our families. Rulers want greater power and more territory because it feeds their pride. Husbands and wives argue and fight because each one wants his or her way and is not willing to consider the other's point of view. Children rebel against their parents because they want their way. Selfish pride is at the root of most of the anger that divides families.

The greater the social and cultural differences between people, the more likely it is that conflict will increase. Because men and women are different, we are prone to conflict in our marriages. Teenagers think that their parents don't understand the younger generation. People from one nationality have difficulty understanding those from other nationalities. The rich think that the poor are lazy and the poor think that the rich are greedy. So it goes!

At the heart of all of these conflicts is sin. But the world refuses to acknowledge this. For example, many in our country say that if we had just used diplomacy with the Muslim extremists, we could have avoided war. But they grossly underestimate the sin problem. Invariably, pacifists make the mistake of thinking that people are basically good (not basically evil) and if we just treat them nicely and sit down and talk, they will be nice to us in return. Neville Chamberlain made that mistake with Hitler. He thought that he had negotiated "peace in our times," but he ignored Hitler's pride and evil intent.

I'm not suggesting that we should be quick to go to war, but I am saying that if we try to negotiate, we had better keep in mind the fact that all people are selfish, proud sinners. To underestimate the sinfulness of the human heart only leads to disaster later. There cannot be any lasting peace among sinners apart from the radical solution of the cross. As John MacArthur put it (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 76), "Peace comes only when self dies, and the only place self truly dies is at the foot of Calvary."

- B. Christ Himself is the only source of peace between those who have been hostile towards one another.

“For He Himself is our peace...” (2:14). Christ not only *made* peace, but He *is* our peace. Peace can be found *only* in one place, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, because He alone can deal with our inherent sin problem. When He saves us, we are “created in Christ Jesus” (2:10). If you are *in Christ* and I am *in Christ*, then He Himself becomes the source of peace between us. We have to view any and all conflict through the lens of the person of Christ.

The fact that Christ is our peace does not mean that peace happens automatically, even between sincere, godly believers. The Corinthian church was rife with conflicts and divisions. Two faithful women in the Philippian church had some sort of conflict, which Paul was concerned about (Phil. 4:2-3). Even Paul and Barnabas had a sharp dispute that led them to part ways in their missionary endeavors (Acts 15:36-40). Paul seemed to realize that sometimes peace is not fully attainable when he wrote (Rom. 12:18), “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with all men.” He says (Rom. 14:19), “So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” The Bible says that we must “seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11).

So even though we are prone toward conflict, even with other believers, the way toward peace is to have Christ reigning as Lord in each heart. To the extent that He is truly Lord of your life and my life, we will experience peace between us, because He does not fight with Himself. One of the marks of true conversion is when those who formerly were deeply hostile towards one another begin to pursue peace with one another. At the source of this new peace is that Christ has come to dwell in each heart, subduing our selfishness and pride. Paul explains how Christ established this new peace between the Jews and Gentiles:

C. Christ established peace through the cross by abolishing the old covenant law and by creating one new man, the church.

(1) Christ established peace through the cross by abolishing the old covenant law.

I prefer the marginal reading of the NASB (Eph. 2:14-15), “For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, the enmity, by abol-

ishing in His flesh the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace."

Jesus Christ broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, which created enmity between the Jews and the Gentiles. He further explains that the source of this enmity was "the Law of commandments contained in ordinances." The word "abolished" means "nullified" or "rendered inoperative." "In His flesh" refers to Christ's death on the cross. Paul goes on to say (2:16) that through the cross, Christ put to death the enmity.

In my opinion, the relationship between the Law and the believer is one of the most difficult subjects in the Bible, and I can only be brief! As I understand it, Paul is saying here what he elsewhere states (Rom. 10:4), that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." God ordained the Law for Israel to demonstrate the impossibility of sinners earning standing before God through law-keeping (Gal. 3:19-24). The law shut up everyone under sin. God's holy law created a barrier between sinners and God.

But the law also created a barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles. The law was given exclusively to Israel as God's covenant people. Many stipulations in the law excluded Gentiles from the Jewish forms of worship. The priests alone could perform the sacrifices and ceremonies. Only Jews who had properly gone through the cleansing rituals could approach the altar with their sacrifices. So the law created a barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Through the cross, Christ fulfilled and thereby nullified or abolished the old covenant law (this harmonizes Eph. 2:15 with Matt. 5:17-19). He instituted the new covenant in His blood, which puts His holy law into the hearts of believers (Heb. 8:6-13). So, as Paul writes, because Christ bore the curse of the law on the cross (Gal. 3:14), "in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." So through the cross, Christ established the basis for peace between sinners and the holy God and peace between the Jews and the Gentiles. In Christ, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Also,

- (2) Christ established peace through the cross by creating the one new man, the church.

The Greek word translated “make” (NASB, 2:15) is literally, “create.” What Adam and Eve lost through sin in the original creation, Christ is recovering through the new man, the church, which is His new creation. F. F. Bruce points out (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], pp. 295-296), “Whereas Jews formerly tended to speak of the division of humanity into Jews and Gentiles, Paul makes a threefold classification into Jews, Greeks (Gentiles), and church of God (1 Cor. 10:32), the last embracing former Jews and Gentiles.” Thus the church is a new humanity or new race.

The practical implication of this is that there is no basis for dividing the church along racial lines, unless there is a language barrier that keeps us from worshiping together. By being multi-racial and multi-cultural, the church should demonstrate to the world this one new man, which Christ created through the cross.

Thus Paul’s first point is that through the cross, Christ reconciled us all to one another. Christ Himself is our peace. Also,

2. Through the cross, Christ reconciled us all to God (2:16-18).

Paul makes three points here, which I can only touch on:

- A. Through the cross, Christ reconciled us in one body to God, having put to death the enmity of the law (2:16).

This overlaps what he said in verse 15, but the focus shifts from our reconciliation to one another to our reconciliation with God. Through the cross, Christ brought Jews and Gentiles into one body, the one new man. Now He reconciles this one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. The law condemned Jew and Gentile alike, because it clearly proves that we all have sinned against God. Jesus Christ perfectly kept God’s law, not only externally, but also on the heart level. The Father testified of Jesus (Matt. 3:17), “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” Because Jesus satisfied God’s righteous demands, through His death that paid our penalty, God offers complete reconciliation and peace to everyone who trusts in Jesus. As Paul puts it (Rom. 5:1), “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have

peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." So the basis for being reconciled to God is not anything that you do, but only by trusting in what Jesus did for you on the cross.

B. Through the cross, Christ preached peace both to pagans and to the religious (2:17).

In verse 17, Paul paraphrases Isaiah 57:19, "And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near." By "you who were far away," Paul means, the Gentiles. They were the strangers to the covenants of the promise (Eph. 2:12). But Christ also preached peace to those who were near, the Jews. Probably Paul is referring not only to Jesus' earthly ministry, but also to His preaching the gospel through the apostles and others in the early church, who, beginning with Peter, preached to the Gentiles (Acts 10; 11:20).

But the point of verse 17 is, it is not only the pagan Gentiles who need to hear the good news of peace with God through the blood of Christ. Religious people (the Jews), those who know about the covenants of God's promise of salvation, also need to hear the good news. Religious observance, even of the strictest kind, cannot save anyone. Paul chronicles his own religious credentials (Phil. 3:5-6), "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." But, keep reading (3:7), "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ." He goes on to emphasize that he did not stand before God in a righteousness of his own derived from the Law, but rather through the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (3:9).

This means that if you are counting on getting into heaven because of your religion or your good deeds, you will not succeed. Peace with God comes only through the cross of Jesus Christ. He paid the debt in full for all that believe in Him!

C. Through the cross, we all have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:18).

Verse 18 is deliberately trinitarian, because the Trinity demonstrates perfectly the harmony and unity that we are to strive for in

the church. While the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery that we cannot completely explain or understand, the Bible is clear that the one God exists in three eternal persons, each of whom is fully God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They each are distinct persons and yet they are not three gods, but one God. The one God has enjoyed perfect fellowship and love between the three persons from eternity.

Here Paul says (2:18), "through Him [Christ], we both [Jew and Gentile] have our access in one Spirit to the Father." At the heart of the gospel is that we now have access to God, whom Paul here calls, "the Father." This means that Christianity is not a religion of rituals. It is a personal relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

"Access" means "introduction," much as a common person would be introduced to the king through the king's representative. If you know the White House chief of staff, he can gain you access to the President. Jesus Christ gains us access to the God of the universe, who is a Father to us because of the cross! What an indescribable privilege, to be able to come into the presence of the Father, through the Son, in dependence on the Holy Spirit! Whether Jew or Gentile, the way into God's presence is the same: it is through the cross of Christ.

### Conclusion

There are two obvious applications of these verses. First, and foremost, *do you have a personal relationship with the Father because you have trusted in the blood of His Son Jesus to cover all of your sins?* The only way to know peace and reconciliation with the holy God is to be justified by faith (Rom. 5:1). Good works won't gain access to the holy God. Religious rituals won't reconcile you to Him. Only the cross, where Jesus reconciled sinners with God, gains access into heaven. Make sure your trust is in Christ alone!

Second, *are you pursuing peace with your fellow believers?* This includes members of your family. It includes people in this church. Perhaps they are a part of another church. If they have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ and you have too, then you must do all that you can to be reconciled to them. The testimony of the cross before a strife-torn world depends on it.

## Application Questions

1. If Christ is our peace, why couldn't two godly men, like Paul and Barnabas, get along in the ministry?
2. Because Christian unity is such a big deal, is it sinful to form various denominations?
3. How can we work to restore demonstrable unity among genuine believers?
4. Reconciliation with God must be the basis of reconciliation among believers. What implications does this have for Christian unity?

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