

The Church Is One Body, Part 1

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

Code: 49-8

Let's turn to Ephesians 2. And this is going to be an introduction, obviously, to a very important portion of Scripture. Ephesians chapter 2. And I need to read it to you, starting in verse 11: "Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded 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 formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity"—or the hatred—"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. And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our 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 are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

This is a powerful and critically important text of Scripture. Paul is facing a very, very large problem here in the church, the New Testament church—and that is the problem of disunity between Jews and Gentiles. Now nobody is surprised to find disunity in the church. That's pretty common, always has been common, and it is on full display today, as all kinds of assaults on the unity of the church are taking place—some of them under some righteous fabrication, but all of them essentially are actually unrighteous. Anything that fractures and fragments and shreds the church is a dishonor to the Lord Himself, who is the head of the church.

But Paul faced that, and we still face it today. It isn't just because human beings have a hard time getting along, even those who are saved and sanctified. It is because in Paul's case, there were some deep-seated hatred. And the two components of that hatred were the Jews and the Gentiles—they hated each other. And this found its way into the church and had to be addressed. But in order to understand it, I want you to go back to—perhaps you would think an unlikely place—but I want you to go back to Jonah, the book of Jonah. We will be able better to understand what Paul is facing if we understand the story of Jonah.

Now everybody knows the story of Jonah, but do they really understand the point of the story? The book of Jonah is a story of a disobedient prophet who, like his nation Israel, hated the pagan Gentiles. Now let's get that at the very outset: Israel hated the Gentiles. They hated them deeply. They had cultivated hate generationally, so it was in the fabric of their being.

Here is a prophet who, along with his nation, also hates Gentiles. And he is called by God to go to a

Gentile city, one of the great Gentile cities in the ancient world, one of the great pagan cities: city of Nineveh in Assyria. This is the calling that Jonah receives from God. He rejects the calling, and he runs the other direction. We all know the story; and the rest of the story is a whale of a tale. And after a monumental miracle of survival inside the great fish and being vomited back up on the land, Jonah finally goes to Nineveh; and he preaches, calls the city to repentance, and the whole city of Nineveh repents. When the whole city repents, Jonah is mad, he is angry, he is disgusted, he is disappointed, he is depressed. Why? Because Jonah did not want Gentiles to be delivered from judgment, he wanted them to feel the full fury of God's wrath.

So just in case you wondered, Jonah is not the hero of the story by any means; he is the antihero. Jonah is the villain, Jonah is the villain. He is the very worst example of a missionary in all of Scripture. So there is a point: Don't be a missionary like Jonah. But that's really not the main point. Jonah is a bad-hearted missionary, who even after an incredibly miraculous deliverance is angry at God. He's angry at God because God was merciful; because like his nation, he hates Gentiles.

Now if you're saying, "Well who are the Gentiles?"—all non-Jews. All non-Jews fall into that category. So if Jonah's not the hero of this story, who is the hero? There is a hero in this story, but the hero in the story is God. God is the hero of the story, and God is very unlike Jonah. God loves, and God sends a preacher. God calls for the wicked to repent, and then God shows them mercy and grace, compassion and salvation, even though they were extremely wicked.

Now it is clear that God had chosen Israel as His people. Yes, they were chosen as His people to be the recipient of divine revelation—the law and the rest of the Old Testament. They were also a nation that received the priesthood, who then could be intermediaries with God from the people. They were the nation that received the prophets, who would speak to the people on behalf of God. Israel was chosen as the stage for the great drama of redemption. They were the people with whom God lived; He dwelt with them. But all of that was not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. All of that was so that they could be a witness nation to the rest of the world—all the Gentiles. They were designed to be a missionary nation.

Way back in the book of Exodus and in chapter 19 this is laid out in unmistakable terms. God speaks, and He says to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel"—this is in chapter 19, verse 3 of Exodus—"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself." In other words God, through miracles, got them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Now verse 5, "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the nations, for all the earth is Mine"—I'm laying claim to the whole earth, all the nations—"and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In other words you are a priest nation. And what does a priest do? Bring people before God; he's an intermediary.

Israel had the responsibility to be a witness of the truth of the one true and living God. They were to tell the nations there was only one God, like the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6, and that all were to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. That was their reason to be chosen, to be the domain of God, to receive the law of God, the priesthood, and the prophets.

But Jonah reflects the fact that the nation Israel had failed totally to accept that mission responsibility. Look at how Jonah begins: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah," chapter 1, verse 1, "the son of Amittai saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come

up before Me.’”

“The word of Yahweh”—literally—“the word of Yahweh came to Jonah.” Revelation from God. But more than that, this is the Word of Yahweh. And who is the Word of Yahweh? The same One in John 1 who created everything, the Word who was with God, who was God, and by Him everything was made. So the One who is the Creator is also the One who brings the call to Jonah. The One who by the word of His mouth made the heavens is the One who speaks to Jonah. This is a divine call: “Jonah, go, and cry against that city.” This is because God is going to save Gentiles.

If you go all the way to the end of the Bible, in the seventh chapter of Revelation you’ll see a list of all the nations—at least some representative nations—that God is saving people from throughout redemptive history; and you see that list at the end of Scripture. God is using His people to reach the world. Israel was to be that national instrument to bring salvation to the nation. So here is Jonah, and he is told to go, and he is told to cry against them for their wickedness and call them to repentance.

Now God had called many other prophets to speak a message to other nations. Abraham did that, Moses did that; Elijah did it, and Elisha did it; Jeremiah did it, Ezekiel did it, Daniel did it, and others. But Jonah is the first one to go. All the other prophets spoke about other nations and to other nations from wherever they were located. They didn’t go anywhere. But in the case of Jonah, he has to go into the despised realm of the Gentiles; he’s called to go.

The whole drama is based on Jonah’s hatred for such a mission. He hates that God is asking him to do this. Why—because it’s hard? Why—because he thinks he might be persecuted? No, go over to chapter 3, verse 10: “When God saw their deeds,” and “they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He didn’t do it.” They repented. They actually repented; we see that back in verse 3, chapter 3: “Jonah arose, went to Nineveh . . . exceedingly great city, three days’ walk. . . . He cried out,” in verse 4, “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Verse 5, “The people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them,” all the way up to “the king.” The whole city essentially repented and believed in God.

And how did Jonah respond? Look at chapter 4, verse 1: “It greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.” That is so bizarre, isn’t it? “He became angry.” And “he prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country?’” “I knew You would do this; this is why I didn’t want to go—because I don’t want any Gentiles receiving Your mercy; they don’t deserve it.” “But I knew You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.” “I knew You were like this. I knew You’d save those people.”

Jonah is reflecting the attitude of the nation Israel. They had no desire for the Gentiles to be converted. The Gentiles had been their enemies. The Gentiles had been blaspheming enemies of God. And they had been faithful—the Jews—and they thought they were protecting the character of God and the honor of God by hating the blasphemers. They certainly had no desire for God to show them salvation.

Now listen, this is not about ethnic identity; some people want to bring that into the discussion. This is not about ethnic identity. They hated all non-Jews. It wasn’t ethnicity that was the issue, it was

religion—because there was only one true religion, and every other religion was a false religion. And they thought it was noble of them to hate false religion, to hate blasphemers, and to be zealous for the protection of Yahweh. The Jews thought, “We deserve—we deserve salvation. We’ve earned it, we’ve earned it; we’re the children of Abraham.” They said that to Jesus.

And the Gentiles did not, and especially the Assyrians—wretched, wicked pagans. Jonah goes to them maybe about 750 BC. Thirty years later or so the Assyrians, the next generation after the generation that believed, God used as the instrument of judgment and took the entire nation Israel, the Northern Kingdom, into captivity, from which they never returned. One generation after this revival the Assyrians were back to paganism, and God used them as an instrument of judgment on the Jews in the captivity of 722 BC. And never did Israel return [as] the Northern Kingdom again.

So this hostility that they had toward the nations—they had fought them. The nations had not only blasphemed God, but they had been enemies of Israel, and blood had been spilled almost continuously. The hatred went very deep. Jonah hated them, and he is simply such a bad prophet, such a bad prophet, that in spite of his incredible story the Jews canceled him, they just canceled him out of their history. How do I know that? Because in John 7, verse 52, the Jews said to Jesus, who was from Galilee, “Search, and see no prophet arises out of Galilee.” They said to Jesus, “You say You’re a prophet and You’re from Galilee. Search, and see no prophet arises out of Galilee.” Wait a minute, Jonah was from Galilee. But he had been canceled out of their history. He was such a disastrous prophet.

This animosity between Jew and Gentile went from generation to generation to generation to generation, and it showed up in the New Testament, it showed up in the New Testament still very strong. It showed up in the early church, to the degree that on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and the church was begun by the power of the Holy Spirit—three thousand people were converted, and they spoke in those foreign languages, and there was the evidence of the presence of the Spirit in fire—that was for the Jews. And the Jews, the Lord knew, would not be able to accept the fact that that would ever be done for Gentiles, even the Jews in the early church.

So when the Samaritans came to faith in chapter 8, the Lord had to repeat what happened on Pentecost, have some apostles there to see that they received the same Spirit with the same attendant signs and wonders, because nobody would believe, none of the Jews would believe that the Samaritans would be accepted into the church. And in chapter 10 of the book of Acts, the Gentiles are converted—Cornelius—and the Holy Spirit doesn’t come until the apostles show up there, and they see the same exact phenomenon, the Holy Spirit’s coming that they saw in Acts 2, because God was saying, “You have to accept the Samaritan half-breeds, you have to accept the Gentiles; it’s one church.”

And again, this is not about ethnic reconciliation, this is about religious hostility. The people in the early church were struggling with this; that’s why Paul wrote the text I just read you. “You people have to understand, Jew and Gentile need to get together.” In Galatians, “There’s neither Jew nor Greek.” In Romans chapter 10, “There’s neither Jew nor Greek. You’ve got to come together as one.”

In fact the church has taken over the responsibility that Israel failed to fulfill. Listen to the Great Commission in Matthew 28: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.” “Go.” This is the Lord speaking to the disciples and launching them. After that in Acts 1:8, “When the Spirit comes

upon you, you will be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.”

So there's a new commission of the church. But even the church, the early church, struggled with that. They struggled with letting the Gentiles in. They struggled so much that there was a major council in the city of Jerusalem to figure out what they were going to do with Gentiles, because Gentiles were being converted under the ministry of Paul. Paul in his epistles addresses the fact that the church is one: “You've got to get over centuries and millennia of hatred.”

In 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul said this: “For as the body is one and hath many members”—the physical body, one body, many parts, they're still “one body; so is Christ.” The church is like your body: one body, many parts. In the next verse, 1 Corinthians 12:13, we read, “For by one Spirit are we all immersed into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, we've all been made to drink into one Spirit.” Four times in those verses, 1 Corinthians 12:12 and 13, the word “body” appears. “You're all one. We all are brought into the body by one Spirit.”

Every biblical metaphor of the church basically focuses on its unity, emphasizes its unity. The church, for example, is one bride with one husband. The church is one flock with one shepherd. The church is one set of branches with one vine. It is one kingdom with one King, one family with one Father, one building with one foundation, one body with one head. There are no classes, there are no ethnic distinctions, there is no hierarchy, there are no blue-ribbon sheep; we're all one. That's why Paul was so upset with the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3. He says, “I can't even write to you, as you are so in the flesh. I can't write to you as mature believers, but as fleshly, because you are so fractured: ‘I'm of Paul. I'm of Apollos. I'm of Cephas. I'm of Christ.’ This is nothing but carnality.” And I just say in the broadest sense possible: Anything that assaults the unity of the church is the flesh. I don't care what justification people think they might have.

God chose the Jewish people not to be an end, but to be the means to the end of world evangelization. Since the day God called Abraham, He made a distinction between Jew and Gentile. But that's not a racial distinction, that's a religious distinction. Those who were the people of God and had the revelation of God needed to reach the rest of the world.

But there was always going to be a potential problem, because God built into Israel's life certain restrictions that kept them from easy interface with Gentiles. They had their own land, and the Lord cleaned out much of the idolatry. They had their own customs, they had their own festivals, they had their own feasts, they had their own worship, they had their own clothing, they had their own dietary laws. And God did this to protect them, to isolate them for their own purity's sake, to separate them. But instead of that keeping them pure, and then being motivated to preach the truth of the true God to the nations around them, they fell into carnal pride, and they kept the laws of God ceremonially and ritually, but not morally and spiritually. And Jonah's an illustration of how they felt toward Gentiles. Carnal pride had allowed them to think of themselves as God's favored nation and to think it was righteous to hate everybody else.

They had contempt. The contempt is amazing; here are some statements you find in Jewish writings: “Gentiles are created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell.” Here's another one: “God loved only Israel of all the nations He made.” Here's another one: “It is not lawful to give help to a Gentile mother in her hour of childbirth, for that would be bringing another Gentile into the world.” So even when the Lord Jesus comes, that kind of contemptuous hostility is very strong.

And even in John 4, you remember the statement, “The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans,” and they weren’t even fully Gentile, they were half-breeds. But the barrier was fixed, and it was firm. If a Jewish girl wanted to marry a Gentile boy, or vice versa, the family had a funeral, not a wedding, because to marry a Gentile was the equivalent of death. So the Jews had that animosity toward the Gentiles. And by the way the Gentiles returned it. Gentiles looked on Jews as slave material—persecuted them, oppressed them, killed them, as you know. They called the Jews the enemies of the human race; and that epithet lasted all the way into the era of Adolf Hitler.

But go back to the New Testament. You can hear the contempt in Pilate’s voice. Pilate is a Roman governor. Listen to the contempt in his voice when he says, “I surely am not a Jew, am I?” Contemptuous. Even across the centuries we can hear the echo of the owners of the Philippian slave girl announcing troublemakers with these words, speaking of Paul and Silas: “These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city.” Very deep-seated hatred. And traces of that bitterness and traces of that disunity are still with us today in what’s known as antisemitism, right? Been around a long time. So if you want to tackle a big issue in the church of Jesus Christ as it gets started, you’ve got to undo centuries of animosity between Jew and Gentile, because God is going to save both, and they will together constitute His church.

In Acts chapter 15 when the Jerusalem Council met, Paul and Silas had come back from a missionary journey, and Gentiles had been converted, and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem said, “What are we going to do with them? What are we going to do with Gentile converts?” And they had a big discussion: “Well do we make them into Jews first? Do you have to be a Jew, do we need to Judaize them? Do you have to become a proselyte to Judaism before you can receive salvation?” And the Jerusalem Council and James, who speaks of that issue, says, “Absolutely not. You have to accept them.”

Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 15, and he says, “Look, you Christians are going to have to understand this. Some people regard the Sabbath, and some people don’t. Some people regard dietary laws, and some people don’t. This is a conscience issue based upon their past, but it can’t be used to divide the church.” This was a huge issue. Even Peter fell victim to it—do you remember that, Galatians chapter 2? Peter got caught up in hypocrisy, feeling very comfortable to be with the Gentiles, until some Jewish believers showed up, and then he scrambled back to act as if he was anti-Gentile; and Peter had to be rebuked by Paul. So the very end of Paul’s ministry, he was preaching unity, unity, unity in Christ. And that’s his message.

Look, I didn’t get to the text, but I do want to make a comment or two—so turn to it—just to set the stage for next time. Let me remind you, in verse 11 where Paul says, “Formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision.’” Who called the Gentiles “uncircumcision”? The Jews: “Uncircumcision, Uncircumcision.” That was a pejorative thing. And what did the Jews give back? They would say of the Gentiles, “Uncircumcision, Uncircumcision,” and the Gentiles would say, “Circumcision, Circumcision.” What are you doing?

Verse 13, “In Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off”—namely the Gentiles—“have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He is our peace, made both groups into one, broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 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.” Beautiful words, isn’t it? Beautiful language. So we’re all one, we’re all one. And we have this incredibly important responsibility to protect that.

Over in chapter 4, verse 13; 4, verse 13. The objective Paul identifies here is that “we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” Or verse 15: “We’re to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, fitted together and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself”—here’s the key—“in love.” Unity is the result of what? Love. Love.

So in this text that we’ll look at next week, Paul says, “I agree. The Gentiles were alienated, separated from Christ,” verse 12, “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” But that’s not true anymore because they have been brought near in Christ. We’re all one. Paul was trying to resolve the most long-lasting, deep-seated animosity in biblical history, but he never gave up on it because he knew it was right.

Any other, lesser cause for unity has to be confronted in the same way with the same unrelenting call to unity. That unity is obviously around doctrinal truth, but it’s still a fight, still a fight, because people can be divisive. The Lord prays for the unity of His church; and that was an apostolic main objective, and it is for us today as well.

Father, we are grateful that You have called us together into one body. We thank You that there’s neither Jew nor Greek, there’s neither male or female, there’s neither bond nor free; we’re all one in You. That oneness is celebrated in the perfect bond of unity, which is the peace that comes from loving one another. We pray, Lord, that we might have that kind of stretching love that Peter talked about, where we reach as far as we can to embrace those who are in Christ, where we let nothing divide us. We see so much fleshly, divisive, hostile, hateful experiences going on in churches. Lord, protect us from that.

May we love You with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love others as ourselves. May we seek not our own things but the things of others, and have the mind that You had, that humbled You to the death on the cross for us. “Greater love has no one than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends.” And may we have that kind of love. May we be known for our love because that’s the truest exemplary demonstration of salvation.

Increase our love more and more. Protect us from any discord, disunity. May we love each other, embrace each other— in the truth, with conviction—at the same time leave room for conscience on those things that are not biblical issues. And in all things may we show love, so that we can put on display the power of the gospel, which when it is truly proclaimed and lived, defines a people by their unity and their love. And that’s our desire. Continue to lead us as we live in this world in a time of judgment. Give us wisdom, give us joy, give us opportunity to proclaim the glorious gospel of Christ. And we ask these things in His name. Amen.

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