

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-NINE)

“NATURAL ENEMIES LOVING ONE ANOTHER”

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh—who are called “uncircumcision” by the so-called “circumcision” that is performed on the body by human hands—

12 that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility,

15 when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees, making peace,

16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.

17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near,

18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

19 So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household,

20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,

22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

In chapter **one** of his letter to the Christians living in **Ephesus**, the Apostle Paul outlined for his readers the spiritual **possessions** of those who are “*in Christ Jesus.*” In chapter **two**, he described their spiritual **position** “*in Christ.*”

In the first half of chapter **two** (verses **1-10**), Paul addressed the matter of the salvation of sinners in general. In the second half of the chapter (verses **11-22**), he focuses his attention on the work of Christ for the Gentiles in particular, and on the reconciliation of Gentiles and Jews in their union with Christ.

Paul desired for the Christians living in Ephesus to understand that in the purpose and plan of God, both Jews and Gentiles had been brought together and made one in Christ.

It was God who had put a difference between the Jews and the Gentiles in order to accomplish His purposes in salvation. But once those purposes were accomplished, there was no more difference. In fact, it was His purpose that these differences be erased forever, and they are

erased through the work of Jesus Christ in reconciliation. In Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile become one.

Paul was acutely aware of the fact that if Christianity was to impact the world in any significant way, it was critical that the Jews and the Gentiles, who had accepted Christ, live together in love and unity in one body-the church. He wanted to witness in the Ephesian church, the realization of God's purpose and plan, which was for the Jewish and Gentile believers, having been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, to be reconciled **to each other**, in light of the fact that they were all members of one body.

In verses **11-16** of chapter **2**, Paul explains how God brought about the reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles. He writes,

11 Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.

12 In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.

13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

14 For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.

15 He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.

16 Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

(New English Translation)

Brothers and sisters, please note that Paul wrote of all that God had accomplished in Christ in the **past** tense. Jesus Christ had already united the Jews and the Gentiles into one people; He had already broken down the wall of hostility that separated them; He had already ended the system of law with its commandments and regulations; He had already made peace between the Jews and the Gentiles by creating one new people from the two groups; He had already reconciled both groups to God and put to death the hostility that existed between them.

So settled was this matter in the mind of God that in **Galatians 3:28**, Paul writes, *“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* Paul is saying, in effect, “All the external barriers that used to divide you have been broken down in Christ Jesus—all the ethnic barriers, all the social barriers, all the gender barriers, all the religious barriers. Now since they have been broken down, I want you both to live out the reality of this in your churches. Break down the internal barriers that you have erected and love each other and have fellowship with each other.”

My brothers and sisters, God is saying the same thing to us. The question is “Are we committed to living out the reality of what God has already accomplished in Christ Jesus, in our interactions with our fellow believers?”

Brothers and sisters, it is critical for us to understand that though we were drawn to Jesus Christ by the Father in a personal way, and though we experienced salvation individually, in the context of the church, we are not to operate individually. In the church we must operate corporately. To be united to Jesus Christ, means that we are connected to

the whole body of Christ, whether we like it or not. If we are truly “*in Christ,*” then we are organically related to every other person who is “*in Christ!*” It is for this reason that no individual member of the body of Christ, can come to full maturity in Christ unless he or she is actively interacting with the other members of the body.

Is this not what Paul tells us in chapter 4, verses **11-16**?

11 And he himself gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, that is, to build up the body of Christ,

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God—a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ’s full stature.

14 So we are no longer to be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes.

15 But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head.

16 From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body builds itself up in love.

(New English Translation)

Those of us who are saved, carry within us the **D.N.A.** of the new heavens and the new earth. When people come among us, in whatever context, and see how we interact with each other, they should be able to get even a glimpse of what God has planned from eternity to do in a world made entirely new.

And it is exactly for this reason that God has placed so many diverse personalities in our assembly. Short persons, tall persons; slim persons, not so slim persons; poor persons, not so poor persons, educated persons, uneducated persons; persons with physical and mental handicaps, and persons without these handicaps; persons whose parents were married, and persons who were raised in a single parent household; persons who were nurtured in the Church, and persons who were not.

God has deliberately and intentionally done this, so that in the midst of all the evidences of brokenness that exist in the world, there will, in this assembly, be evidences of the new world order that will ultimately be ushered in by God. Of course, we understand that this will not be reflected perfectly, but it must be manifested in us. This is why it is so important for us to be together because on our own, as individuals, we are not able to convey the reality of what it means for all these radically different persons to be united in Christ. And if we view our Christian experience in individualistic terms, then it is incandescently clear, that we are very immature and that we do not yet understand the reason why God saved us.

Can you imagine what the effect must have been on pagans, living in the first century, who were aware of the divisive, hostile nature of the relationship that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles, when they attended a worship meeting and saw Jews and Gentiles, singing together, praying together, eating together, having fellowship with each other, greeting each other with a holy kiss, calling each other brother and sister? They would very likely have asked, “What has brought about this radical transformation?” And what an opportunity that would have created for someone to testify to them concerning the amazing grace of God.

On the other hand, how ironic and hypocritical it would be for us to go out and invite members of the community outside, to come in, when we

who are members of the inside community do not even like being with the other members of the community.

John Wesley, the English theologian and evangelist said, *“Although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.”*

In his book *“Love in Hard Places,”* the noted New Testament scholar, **D. A. Carson**, has made an observation which I find very challenging. He writes, and I quote,

*“I suspect that one of the reasons why there are so many exhortations in the New Testament for Christians to love other Christians is because this is not an easy thing to do. Many fellow Christians will appear to be, at least initially or to the immature, “little enemies.” To put the matter differently, if Christians love Christians, it is not exactly the same thing as what Jesus has in mind when he speaks rather dismissively of tax collectors loving tax collectors and pagans loving pagans. What he means in these latter cases is that most people have their own little circle of “in” people, their own list of compatible people, their friends. Christian love...must go beyond that to include people outside the group. The objects of our love must include those who are **not** “in:” it must include enemies.*

Ideally, however, the church itself is not made up of natural “friends.” It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything of the sort. Christians come together, not because they form a natural collocation (i.e. not because they are naturally close to each other), but because they have been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common

allegiance. In the light of this common allegiance, in light of the fact that they have all been loved by Jesus himself, they commit themselves to doing what he says – and he commands them to love one another. In this light, they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.”

Brothers and sisters, such a situation is unique. It is not possible to find this kind of scenario anywhere else but in the church of Jesus Christ.

The believers in Ephesus to whom Paul wrote this letter, would probably have never considered the word “church” to refer to a location. They would have considered it to be a reference to the community of believers. They probably would never have understood the word “church” to mean a place to attend. They would have understood it to mean a group of people to whom they belonged.

Is that our understanding of the word?

The Grace Workshop Ministries should not primarily refer to a place where we gather for worship, but rather to a community of believers who are increasingly speaking and practicing the truth in love, learning to deal with the deepest divisions in a Christ-like manner, resolving conflicts by engaging in loving confrontation, fellowshiping our differences, exercising appropriate church discipline and demonstrating redemptive love. And the only way that these things can happen is if the gospel of the grace of God is preached, taught, understood, believed and applied to every area of our lives.