TO RECONCILE BOTH OF THEM TO THE CROSS

Ephesians 2:11–22

Key Verse: 2:16

“…and in one body to reconcile both of them to the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”

Unity is the major theme of Ephesians. To us, divisions may seem normal or unavoidable. But the Bible says divisions are one of “the acts of the flesh” (Gal5:20). The Bible says disunity is not spiritual (Ro16:17; 1Co1:10; 11:18; Tit3:10). Jesus unites people. Since Jesus unites, we should be doing our best to build unity (Eph4:3) and to make peace (Mt5:9; Ro14:19). Why is unity so important? We can see it in sports and in the military. The best teams aren’t those with strong mavericks unable to work together, but of team members, even those with many weaknesses, who are truly united. One of the oldest military strategies is “Divide and conquer.” The devil is a master at this. So Ephesians 6:10–18 tells us we need the armor of God to take our stand against the devil’s schemes. The Bible says, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Ecc4:12). Even a few people united are powerful. There’s power in unity. When we’re perfectly united in mind and thought (1Co1:10), God can use us powerfully for gospel ministry. It’s not human uniformity, like dressing the same way or talking the same way; it’s spiritual unity. Today’s passage shows us how we can have spiritual unity: it’s through the cross of Jesus. We usually think that through the cross Jesus gives us personal peace with God, and that’s true. But this passage shows us that his cross also gives us peace with our Christian brothers and sisters. Among us we have pretty significant age and cultural differences. Sometimes we may hurt each other intentionally or unintentionally. Today we want to learn what it really means to be reconciled to the cross. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word.

Before we start, it’s good to review briefly the history behind Paul’s emphasis on unity. Paul called himself “the apostle to the Gentiles” (Ro1:5; 11:13; 15:15,16; Gal2:8). God had given him a clear calling for it (Ac9:15; 13:47; 22:21). It would have been so much easier for Paul to just share the gospel with Jews, his own kind of people. But because he crossed the religious, cultural and ethnic divide and engaged in ministry to Gentiles, Paul’s fellow Jews hated him and wanted to kill him, and he ended up in prison. Today most churches are ethnically uniform: all white or all black or all Hispanic or all Asian. But the churches Paul established were not ethnically uniform; they had both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Despite the seemingly insurmountable divide between Jew and Gentile in his time, Paul also believed in unity. Years before he wrote Ephesians, Paul had collected an offering from new Gentile churches to take to the church in Jerusalem that had been suffering from a severe famine (Ro15:26; 2Co8:1–4; 9:2); he also brought some new Gentile converts along with him (Ac20:4). He wanted the Gentiles to appreciate that God’s salvation and his spiritual blessings had come from the Jews (Ro15:27). And he wanted his Jewish brethren to see how the gospel of Jesus was changing lives among the Gentiles and making them dear and loving brothers and sisters in Christ. He believed so strongly in this spiritual unity that he was willing even to die in Jerusalem, he said, “for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Ac21:13). He told the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome to work for spiritual unity, saying, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Ro14:19). Even though Paul was arrested and jailed for several years, then had to go to Rome as a prisoner, he was not jaded about working for spiritual unity. Now, while under house arrest in Rome, he writes about unity as the major theme in his letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 1 he writes that God wants to bring “unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:10). And in chapter 4 he says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3).

In explaining how we can have such spiritual unity, Paul first mentions the blood of Christ. He reminds the Gentile believers of who they used to be without Christ. Look at verses 11–13. He says they were excluded from citizenship, foreigners to the covenants, without hope and without God. But now they were brought near through the blood of Christ. Through the blood of Christ, they became fellow citizens among God’s people and members of his household (19). Through the blood of Christ, they became God’s precious covenant people. Through the blood of Christ, they especially came near to God and had the same hope in God. There’s a saying, “Death is the great leveler.” But actually, the blood of Christ is truly “the great leveler.” All people, Jew or Gentile, come near to God in the same way, through the blood of Christ. And, we can’t get any nearer to God than through the blood of Christ.

Our natural tendency is to judge people based on human standards (Jn8:15). They say that it’s within the first few seconds we encounter a person that we already draw conclusions about them based on their race, appearance and demeanor. In drawing our conclusions, we’re actually judging them, because we don’t really know them. But this happens not only with strangers but also among Christians. In Romans 14 Paul repeatedly tells Jewish and Gentile Christians not to judge each other or treat each other with contempt, but to accept each other as a brother or sister “for whom Christ died” (Ro14:15). In other words, we need to see people on the basis of whether or not they’ve accepted the blood of Jesus. If someone has accepted the blood of Jesus, they’re near to God, and spiritually, they’re our “blood” brothers and sisters. This is what it means to see each other from a spiritual point of view.

Next, in explaining how spiritual unity is possible, Paul says that Jesus destroyed the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. Read verses 14,15a. In a sense, it wasn’t just race; it was the law that had divided Jews and Gentiles. Jews wanted to keep the law, and the Gentiles didn’t. But Jesus in his flesh set aside the law. It means he fulfilled all the righteous demands of God’s law when he died on the cross. Now, we’re no longer under the law’s demands; we’re under grace. Now, we don’t have to try to keep laws to earn righteousness. And now, the law can no longer condemn us. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, we’re completely forgiven and accepted by God. Paul writes in Romans, “So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God” (Ro7:4). When we realize that we’ve died to the law through the body of Christ, we can bear the fruit of love and stop being legalistic with one another, and this builds unity.

Paul goes even further. Read verse 15b. Paul is saying that when we come to the cross of Jesus and receive his grace, we receive a new identity. The cross makes us a new creation. Later, in 4:24 Paul says this new humanity is a new self that is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. So it’s a godly new humanity. When we become godly in character, we can become one with each other. It’s this new humanity that Jesus has given us that makes peace between radically different people. In this new humanity, we don’t see people based on typical human prejudices or distinctions. So Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In the Soviet Union Stalin tried to mix ethnicities so that people’s primary loyalty would be to the communist state. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, people went right back to their ethnic loyalties, because their hearts were not changed. But the gospel of Jesus changes our hearts, so that now, we’re no longer primarily American or Korean or Hispanic or Indian or Chinese, but primarily Christian. Our first loyalty is to Jesus and to his precious people, whatever ethnicity or nationality they might be.

Then in verse 16 Paul goes back to the cross. Let’s read verse 16. Here Paul again mentions hostility (2:14,16). Clearly, this hostility is not easily resolved. But Paul says God’s purpose is to reconcile people who are hostile towards one another to the cross. What does it mean to be reconciled to the cross? Reconciliation means to resolve mutual hostility. Because of our sins, we were hostile to God. And because of our sins, God was angry with us. But through the cross of Jesus, God forgives all our sins, and we realize we have no reason to be hostile to him. This is what it means to have peace with God.

But Paul also says that through the cross of Jesus God puts to death people’s mutual hostility. Read verse 16 again. How does God put our mutual hostility to death “through the cross”? First of all, through the cross of Jesus, we realize the holiness of God, who hates sin so much that he had to sacrifice his Son in order to atone for it. Through the cross of Jesus, we also realize the depth of our own sinfulness that drove Jesus to the cross. Above all, through the cross of Jesus we realize God’s abounding, forgiving grace. When we see God’s forgiving grace to us in the cross of Jesus, it melts our hardened hearts. It breaks down our pride and self-righteousness. It takes away our anger, hatred and grudges. Through the cross of Jesus our eyes are opened to see God’s great love. Through the cross we can see God’s great hope for sinners. We can see other people not as those with whom I need to be hostile, but as those for whom Christ died. Through the cross, instead of having hostility, we can be completely humble and gentle, and patient, “bearing with one another in love” (4:2). Through the cross, we can be more gracious, accepting and committed to building each other up for Jesus’ sake.

We all have people that we find hard to get along with. Often it’s due to personality conflicts. Some people just rub us the wrong way. Then there’s people who think differently than we do. It’s not their personality, it’s what they’re advocating that bothers us. And then there’s people who’ve actually hurt us. Sometimes we’re hurt by what they say or by what they do. Sometimes we’re hurt by what they didn’t do. We expected them to be a friend, but we were sorely disappointed. We invested ourselves in them, but they suddenly cut off the relationship out of selfishness, and we feel used and disrespected. We erect barriers around our hearts so we won’t get hurt again. What can we do? We need to come to the cross of Jesus to experience his forgiveness. There, our hurt feelings can be washed away, and we can forgive our brother or sister from our hearts (cf. Mt18:21–35). In the cross we find the freedom to forgive. In the cross we can forgive those who used us. In the cross we can start praying for people once again. In the cross we find true grace and peace.

In verse 17 Paul says, “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” Jesus didn’t literally come from heaven to preach peace to people in far off countries. He preached peace through his cross. Jesus still preaches peace today through his cross. His cross preaches peace to those far away from God, and peace to those who are near to God. Any kind of sinner can find peace with God through the cross. When we have peace with God through the cross of Jesus, we can have true peace with one another. This is why Paul wrote in verse 14, “For he himself is our peace.”

Read verse 18. God the Father gives us access to his own holy presence through the blood of his Son and the gift of his Spirit. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are in perfect unity. When we have access to this God of unity, we cannot but grow in unity with his other dear children.

Read verse 19. “Fellow citizens” means having the same full birthrights as citizens. “Members of his household” means they are not house guests or servants, but permanent, fellow family members. A sense of belonging is a real human need, especially among young people. So many young people look for social cliques where they feel they fit in. But in Christ, we all belong together, even if we’re decades apart in age and worlds apart in culture, social class or background. Verse 20 tells us we have the same foundation: the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus our chief cornerstone. It means that when we study the Bible and focus on Jesus, we can have the same foundation. Let’s read verses 21,22. Here, the words “in him” are repeated twice. Jesus binds us together like mortar holds bricks together. Jesus builds us together to be a gathering in which God lives by his Spirit. This kind of spiritual unity in Christ is real and powerful. It’s the source of our holiness, and of our ability to live as Jesus’ witnesses.

Let’s read our key verse again, verse 16. May God work in our hearts through the Holy Spirit to be reconciled through the cross. Through the cross, may God build us together into true spiritual unity so that we may glorify him and be useful to him.