

Pastoral Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name ...

... you are king of kings and lord of lords and we worship you.

As we gather together we ask you to meet with us, come near to us and give us strength.

Take from us our burdens, our sorrows, our uncertainties ... and give us courage.

Take from us anything that would hinder us or distract us in worship today.

Take our heart, our hands, our head, our feet and use it all ...

... may every breath, every day, every life, ever strength and ever talent be used for your glory.

We pray for all of those who have received harm and injury from the recent hurricane. Comfort your children in the midst of their losses ...

... but Lord also use those losses to bring sinners into your salvation.

As a nation we wonder why such tragedy and calamity comes. Some say it is because of our national ... we know we deserve punishment.

But Lord, just as Abraham pleaded for Sodom we plead for America.

Our great cities are riddled by crime, violence, addiction, and wickedness ... LORD let your kingdom come ...

... Send your light and truth to chase the devil and his adversaries away.

Defeat the evil that lurks in our state houses and our federal institutions.

We pray for our leaders that you would do for them what you did for Nebuchadnezzar ... drive them into the fields and away from their places of power ... until they humble themselves to you.

Raise up men and women of truth, ethics, and integrity to lead this nation.

Finally, Lord again we ask you to bless Mt Zion.

For 153+ years you have had a people in this place, may it continue be so for many more years to come ...

... may your people dwell in peace and may your name always be glorified here until you return to make all things new.

Give us deep passion for you, for your gospel, and for your glory.

... may we love one another as Christ loved the church.

Let those whom you have given to Christ be gathered to this hallowed ground, may their prayers be bold, their doctrine sound, their compassion deep, and their hope steadfast.

May our cry always be with the Psalmist, "Lord let thy face to shine upon us and we will be saved!"

"Let the people praise your name, let the earth be filled with your glory" and ...

... Lord Jesus come quickly. Come in fullness and power! Come in glory!

Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen!

We Are United

Ephesians 2:11-22

As last week we are going to just look at one paragraph today and whereas last week's paragraph was comprised of 3 sentences today's paragraph has 4.

The first point is one sentence, the second point looks at the next 2 sentences and then the third point is the last sentence.

Pause.

I want to begin with a question from **John de Graaf** in his book *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*

“When your time comes and your whole life flashes before you, will it hold your interest? How much of the story will be about moments of clarity and grace, kindness and caring? Will the main character—you—appear as large and noble as life itself, or as tiny and absurd as a cartoon figure, darting frantically among mountains of stuff?”¹

Jesus said that the worth of a person was not measured by what they owned or possessed, but by what there were.

Jesus understood what many have forgotten that a good life is characterized, not by the value of our possessions, but by the quality of our relationships with one another.

When I say “many have forgotten this” I am not talking about society at large ... I particularly talking about the church.

The strong bonds within local communities and between local churches were a testament to the gospel of grace preached.

Today the relationship between local congregations, even within the same denomination, is mainly competitive—a consequence of churches embracing the philosophies of the church growth movement.

¹ John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H Naylor, *Affluenza: the All-Consuming Epidemic (bk Currents)*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 30, location 4710.

Here is a quote from **Skye Jethani** in his book *The Divine Commodity*.

“There was a time when competition among churches was minimal. Although every town had multiple churches and some ‘sheep swapping’ did occur, most people stayed committed to their own congregation ... The thought of switching congregations was a rare, even bizarre, notion.” - Skye Jethani The Divine Commodity.²

Living on the western edge of the Wilmington Baptist Association I watched as the crowds migrated from Calvary Baptist to College Acres to Northside Baptist to Scott’s Hill to Port City Community Church and then on ...

... every church trying to be the next biggest, best thing in town.

I want to tell you today that is not what the true gospel of Jesus Christ does ... the gospel doesn’t divide us or place us in competition ... the gospel is supposed to unite.

Please allow me one more quote. This one comes from Dr. John M. Perkins in his work *With Justice for All*:

“The only purpose of the gospel is to reconcile people to God and each other. A gospel that doesn’t reconcile is not a Christian gospel at all. But in America, it seems as if we don’t believe that. We don’t believe the proof of our discipleship is our love for one another). No, we think the proof is in numbers—church attendance, decision cards. Even if our “converts” continue to hate each other, even if they will not worship with their brother and sisters in Christ, we point to their “conversion” as evidence of the gospel’s success. We have substituted a gospel of church growth for the true gospel of reconciliation.”³

This is the grand purpose of today’s sermon: To show you clearly from the Word of God that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel that draws us closer to one another ...

... it is a gospel that causes us to love one another more.

... it is a gospel that despises comparison but loves compassion.

² Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 87.

³ Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 9.

Pray With Me

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth 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 once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph. 2:11-13)

1. The Power of the Gospel Unites us ...

One of the great things about the gospel is that it creates communities of faith and it creates them out of people that are very different from one another.

... the gospel takes people of all tribes, tongues, and nations and turns them into loving family members.

In this sentence Paul begins by telling us what we were and pointing out that there are only 2 divisions of people.

- The Jews, whom Paul calls “the circumcision”
- The Gentiles ... whom Paul calls “the uncircumcision”

These Ephesians (who are labeled as ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are of ‘the circumcision’) were in the past:

- Separated from Christ
- Alienated from the commonwealth of Israel
- Strangers to the covenant of promise

In verse 12 Paul is speaking specifically about the Ephesians ... the Gentiles ... that would include most of us.

... the Gentiles and the Jews lived in two different worlds ... with two different mindsets.

... Then in verse 13 Paul goes one step further to show us the power of the Gospel.

But in verse 13 Paul says - **YOU** -who were ‘far off’ or ‘far apart’ have been brought near (together) by the blood of Jesus Christ.

This is God’s plan!

God, through the blood of Jesus, by the power of the gospel in himself—would take the two groups of humanity and make one new humanity.

Paul wants us to know that is who we are ... who God says we are ...

... a new humanity in Christ Jesus.

How is it possible that ONE JESUS could unite so many from so many different nations, languages, and cultures.

EXAMPLE OF THE TUNING FORK A440.

If we are in harmony with Jesus, then we will be in harmony with one another.

The Power of the Gospel Unites us by removing what divides us ...

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:14-18)

2. The power of the gospel unites us by removing what divides us...

What is it that divides us?

One, **what is it that divides us?**

Paul tells us it in verses 14 and 16 ... “*the dividing wall of hostility.*”

In verse 14 Paul writes that Jesus has **broken down** this dividing wall of hostility ...

... then in verse 16 Paul writes that God has killed this hostility by reconciling us through the cross.

But before we get too far, we need to ask, **what is the hostility?**

Paul gives us the answer in verse 15:

... this hostility is ... *“The law of the commandments expressed in the ordinances.”*

Paul is saying that the law God gave Moses divided people...

... So, does that mean that the law of Moses is bad?

Not at all ... Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:8 *“Now we know the law is good...”*

God gave to the Jews (through Moses) the law so that the Jews could be a light to the nations by their obedience to it.

... by the Jews adherence to Moses’ law the gentiles would be able to see a godly, loving, just, and holy society ...

... their loyalty to the one true God was supposed to attract the Gentiles to God and His glory

BUT UNFORTUNATELY, THAT IS NOT WHAT HAPPENED!

The Jews didn’t just love the law, they became proud and self-righteous over the fact that they were the ones who had the law.

You see ... **The things we most cherish and admire about ourselves can become the things that divide us.**

When God gives us good gifts ...

... there is something about the sinful human heart that takes those good gifts and rather than merely use them ... begins to see those gifts as an indicator of superiority.

... the individual who has been blessed with those gifts begins to look down at everyone who doesn't have those same gifts.

... in other words, the good gifts become the basis of hostility and division.

... this is not just true with individuals, it is true of groups of people

... races, cultures, classes of people

Because they had the law the Jews felt that they were superior to those who did not.

Sin has so polluted the human heart that we take the best things about ourselves and then use those things to bolster our self-esteem and fuel our ego ...

The best example of this is the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11

... The Pharisee lifts his eyes to heaven and prays, "O Lord I thank thee I am not like other people."

That's how the sinful heart operates ...

Remember the song: **A country boy can survive** There is a line in that song that says:

*I had a good friend in New York City
He never called me by my name just hillbilly
My Grandpa taught me how to live off the land
And his taught him to be a businessman*

It's a song about someone who takes pride in the fact they were born and raised in the country ... instead of being born and raised in the city.

... as if somehow being raised in the city is "lesser"

Think about what is happening in that song by **Hank Williams Jr.**

The singer's identity doesn't really come from his talents, possessions, characteristics, or upbringing ... his identity comes from how he compares himself to his friend's talents and upbringing

... how he compares himself to others.

... too often we get our identity from how we compare ourselves to others.

People aren't proud of being **rich** ... they are proud of being richer than the next person.

... not proud of being **talented** ... but being more talented than the next person

... not just being a **good parent** ... but being a better parent than someone else.

We are hard workers, so we despise the lazy person.

We are educated, so we think less of those that aren't ... and I've seen that go the other way as well.

Israel had the law (and although they often disobeyed it) but they still looked down those that didn't have it.

We don't see the differences in others as simply being different ... we see the differences of others as being less because they are different ...

This is true of ethnic groups, culture, education, parenting styles, economic status ...

The sinful heart is so attached to these identity markers that these things often become how we "shore up" our self-worth ...

So if this is the problem what is the solution?

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two... (Eph 2:14-15)

Don't forget that Jew and Gentile includes every race in the world.

God's purpose in grace is to create inside the church a "new man" or "a new humanity"

Let me illustrate: *If you are in a club (golf, fishing) you share that common interest with everyone in the club ... you connect in one or two ways ...*

... but when you share the same race or culture, that is an even more profound because race and culture affect every area of your life and you will feel thousands of connections.

Now, Paul is saying that when you become a Christian, even though you are Chinese, American, French, Hispanic ... even though you share thousands of connections with other Chinese, American ...

... becoming a Christian is even more (most) profound thing because it creates extensive connections of birth and rebirth that reaches even into eternity.

... you will find that your connection to a Spanish Christian will be much deeper than your connection to an American Atheist.

... because you share the same faith.

God's purpose is to create inside the church "a new humanity" through the transformative power of the gospel.

The Power of the Gospel Unites us by removing what divides us and thereby connecting us to one another in salvation to everlasting hope, and eternal reward.

... this is the way God creates a new humanity ...

... this is how the far are made near.

Here in Ephesians Paul is saying that because of what Jesus has done something can happen that has never happened before in the history of the world ...

... Here in Ephesians Paul says that because of what Jesus has done something can happen that has never happened before

... very different people from very different situations can come together and live in peace as equals.

Racism and division will never be eradicated by legislation and public policy because ultimately the problem is not a problem of education, culture, or ethnicity ...

... the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart ...

... and the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change the human heart.

The Power of the Gospel Unites us by removing what divides us and gives us a brand-new identity.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

3. The Power of the Gospel Unites us by removing what divides us and gives us a brand-new identity.

In verse 12 we saw that our old identity was “alienated and strangers” but now in verse 19 Paul says this is no longer true.

Being reconciled to God breaks down the dividing wall by removing the dividing hostility and the result is:

- A supernatural family is born
- A supernatural spiritual community is created in Christ Jesus

... This is something brand-new!!!

This is not just a nice thing ... this is a necessary thing.

... and we need to do everything we can to make sure that nothing or no one rebuilds this dividing wall!

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb 3:12-13)

We are to “take care” of each other, to assist one another because the real danger of being hardened and divided by the deceitfulness of sin exists.

... all the way back in Genesis 4 God warned Cain that “sin was crouching at the door of the human heart.”

... Here is what is so wonderful about what God has done ...

This supernatural family, this spiritual community that the gospel creates brings with it ...for lack of a better word ... **a protective closeness.**

Look at this text, Paul uses three pictures to show the growing closeness that exists within the community of faith.

fellow citizen

members of the household of God

building stones “being built together.

Each one of these illustrates a growing intensity in closeness.

Fellow citizen... citizens of the same country live miles apart but serving and loving the same king.

Family members of the same household living a few feet apart and sharing the same parent.

Then **building stones** ... we are adjacent to each other. ... each one absolutely dependent upon one another.

This is what the progressive work of the gospel is supposed to look like in a church!

Paul says this growing togetherness causes us to grow into a “holy temple” ... a dwelling place for God.

May I give you a warning? ... The ultimate proof that God is **not present** in a church is division, disunity and feelings of superiority and jealousy.

May I encourage you? ... The glorious evidence of God’s power and presence in a church is unity, forgiveness, preferring one another, and humility.

*Sin says, “I am better than you therefore we must be at odds with one another.” **The gospel says, “regardless of the life we live everyone is equally lost.” Sin says, “You are different therefore you are inferior.” The Gospel says, “In Christ we are all one.”***

The Power of the Gospel Unites us by removing what divides us and giving us a brand-new identity.

... the gospel restructures the way think about yourself and the way you think about others.

First-The gospel destroys the sinful internal comparison apparatus ... it frees us from finding our identity through comparison to others.

Second-The gospel gives you a new identity, not based in yourself, but based in the righteousness of Jesus Christ!

... look back at that amazing statement in verse 16—**Jesus reconciled us to God and one another on the cross by killing the hostility.**

... WHAT does that mean?

In **2 Cor. 5:21** Paul writes that *God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin for us ...*

It doesn't mean that Jesus **became hostile** on the cross, it means that Jesus **became hostility**.

Because we have been hostile to each other, God should be hostile toward us –that is what we deserve... **but that is not what happened.**

... **INSTEAD**, on the cross God the Father treated Jesus as sin **and we sinners** should be treated in order that He might **treat us** as Jesus deserves to be treated.

Wow! Could anything be more wonderful???

... In fact, after dying for us and bearing our shame and sin Hebrews 2:10 says that Jesus, right **is not ashamed to call us brothers.**

If a man dying on the cross for everybody ...

... If Jesus breathing his last breath praying for forgiveness for His enemies ...

... If this is at the core of who you are

... Then it unites you with everyone else who has this same passion at the core of who they are.