

Kevin launched our series two Sundays ago by giving us an overview and then introducing to us something called this Rule of Life. Last week, Kevin dove a little deeper into this question of how do we change. In this message, we're going to ask questions about what it really means to be the people of God. What does it mean to become the people of God? And what does it mean to live as the people of God?

I'll begin with a story. It's a favorite story of mine and has meant a lot to me over the years. It took place during World War II in Europe with a group of American soldiers who had been in a battle. One of their fellow soldiers was killed, and the soldiers, in their grief, were looking for a place to bury their friend. They wanted to bury him next to a church, so they went to the caretaker, who was a priest, and said, we'd like to bury our friend in the churchyard. The priest asked if he was a Catholic. They said that he wasn't; he was a Protestant. The priest replied that this was a Catholic cemetery and they could only bury Catholics there. He apologized and said that those were the rules.

They were obviously disappointed. They decided to bury him outside of the churchyard fence, so he was still close to the church. They then went back to their tents. The next morning, they got up early and decided to pay their last respects to their friend, and then they were back off to the battlefield. They came to the churchyard and looked around, but they couldn't find the grave where they had buried him. There was only undisturbed dirt outside the fence. They didn't get it. So they found the priest. They said that they had buried their friend outside the fence, and he was now gone. And the priest replied that he couldn't sleep last night and was upset about what he had told the guys. So in the middle of the night, he got up and moved the fence.

As I think about that, it raises this question in me. How many of you know, for a fact, that you serve a God who moved the fence for you? He included you. If you say, "Oh, I'm an outsider." God says, "I moved the fence." He says that we have access. And we have access because of one event, Jesus' death and resurrection. And then you may say, "Well, you don't know my past. You don't know the people that I have hurt; the sins that I've committed." He says, "That's why I moved the fence to include you."

People may think that the people of God won't accept them. They may think they are a foreigner or raw. People don't understand them. They can't relate to them. And God says, "I move the fence; you're included. And if they don't accept you, that's on

them. And trust that I'm working in their hearts. I built a bridge. And that bridge is in the shape of a cross."

So now we're in the letter of Ephesians 2, and Paul is describing in vivid language how the wall that separated Jew and Gentile has been bridged by the finished work of Christ. Let me just say that racism and prejudice were alive and well in the first century. The Jews looked down on anyone who wasn't a Jew. The Greeks believed that anyone who didn't speak Greek was a barbarian; the Romans oppressed or persecuted anyone who didn't bow to Caesar. Division, slavery, hatred, suspicion, fear, and walls of separation were the only life they knew. But Jesus and his work on the cross tore down those walls.

Paul is telling us that the only hope to heal hearts, to heal families, and to heal societies is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The only hope to break down walls that are built on racism and hatred is the Gospel of Jesus. In fact, I think in this room, you may be sitting, and you may look across the room, and maybe you're sitting next to somebody that, if it were not for the gospel, you might not even be in the same room, but because of the gospel. You've been reconciled. Someone once said, "We are sinners saved by grace. There are lots of different kinds of nuts in the Lord's fruit cake. So from one nut to another nut, welcome to God's fruit cake!"

What Paul does here is show us three great things that happen to the Gentiles, three great things that happen to us. We were once far away, but now we've been brought near, we were separated, but now we have access with all the rights and privileges, and benefits. We were foreigners, but now we're a blended family.

"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—" (v. 11). As far as Jews were concerned, there were two kinds of people. There were Jews, and there was everybody else.

Now there may be some in this room today that were born Jewish, but for the sake of argument, I would trust that most of us here are Gentiles. And Paul is speaking to Gentiles here. The Hebrew word for Gentile is Goyim, which means nations. The term uncircumcised that Paul uses here is used to describe the Gentiles, and it was not a compliment. It was a way to mock them as outsiders as lesser. It was really prejudicial in the way it was used in the context of the day.

"...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). So Paul is saying that we Gentiles didn't have some of the advantages that Jews had. Paul explains some of this in Romans 9:4-5.

Speaking of the Jews, Paul says that theirs is the adoption to sonship. Theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God overall.

From a spiritual standpoint, the Jews had all the advantages and privileges. Gentiles had nothing. And the problem was that the Jewish nation lost its focus. They were supposed to be the nation that would bring the promised Messiah to all the nations, the Gentiles, and they blew it. So notice the words Paul uses to describe us before Christ—separate, excluded foreigners without hope, without God in the world.

So before Christ, the Jews had a hope that the coming son of David would save them from their sins. We had no claim on the Messiah coming to us without citizenship. We had no rights as citizens in God's kingdom. We had no access to God. We had no temple worship, no way to approach God through the priests, or the sacrifices, no ties to Moses, and no ties to the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And then he says, "without hope and without God in the world," now think about that. That's about as low as you can go. Akin Hughes, a wonderful Bible teacher, describes the first century as being the age of suicide. The polytheistic Gentile gods had let them down. Institutions had let them down; they were not working. And isn't this just a description of our society now? And when I say now, I don't mean present. I mean, today. Back in 2019, the Washington Post wrote, and this was before Covid, that we were facing a rising tide of despair, and I add anxiety. There is fear all around us; friends and people that we love and care for are struggling. Do you know anyone out there who is really enjoying their life right now and feeling hopeful, enthusiastic living their lives, and are excited about the future?

Now back to verse 13, Paul is saying that was then, and this is now because of the Gospel of Jesus. *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13).* What could be better to hear if you are a drowning person in despair than verse 13?

We Gentiles are brought near by the cross of Christ. The blood of Christ means that by his death in our place, he has provided a means for us to be brought near to him. Once without Christ, now in Christ. Once without citizenship, now full citizens of God's Kingdom. Once without hope, now promised a glorious future. Being far away, being excluded, and never being picked

for the team brings back this shutter of embarrassment that you had as a child. Exclusion never feels good. Inclusion feels good.

The great preacher G. Campbell Morgan tells of a time when he was interviewing for a position at a church. After interviewing, he was waiting to hear an answer, and he was very hopeful that he would be picked by the search team. This was in the prior century. But Campbell got some disappointing news. He wired his father one word when he got the news—rejected. Campbell's father wired back very quickly, "We may be rejected on earth, but we are accepted in heaven." That applies to all of us.

No matter what you're going through today, you are accepted in heaven. No matter if you've been excluded by your friends, you've been accepted into heaven. Even if you've been cast out by your family, you are accepted in heaven. You've been demoted at work; you are accepted in heaven. For those who feel far away today, because of the blood of Jesus, we have been brought near to God.

Now let's look at what Christ actually did to make us the people of God.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. vv. 14-16

We were separated, but now we have access. We need to know that Judaism was all about separation. If you were to go to a first-century synagogue, you would see it was separated by gender. The men were on one side; the women were on the other side. And if you were a convert to Judaism, you had your own special box or place at the back where you could be in the room but separate from those born into Judaism. That's in a synagogue in a local village, but now in the grand temple in Jerusalem, this high place, the place of the holy place of worship, separation is illustrated all throughout the rooms and courts and walls.

One of my favorite go-to Bible teachers these days is a pastor named Skip Heitzig. He's one of my go-to listen-to guys, and he states that the great temple was on a platform of about 35 acres. So it was a large platform, and you had the inner Holy of Holies, where the Arc of the Covenant was. And there was a veil or a heavy curtain that separated that from the outer part of that inner court. And he said there were only priests, who could only be males. They could only enter that inner court outside of that curtain. And then you have the outer court of Israel where all the regular Jewish people could go. Those who weren't priests. And then outside of that court, you had a separate court which was for the Jewish women. And after that, there was this stairway that went down steep descending stairs. At the bottom of the

stairs is a four-and-a-half-foot wall. And on the other side of that wall was called the court of the Gentiles. You were so far away from where the action was—imagine the nosebleed seats you can get at a stadium. That's where you need binoculars to see what is going on.

If you were a Gentile, who was seeking God in and around the temple, on that wall (they recently discovered some signs in an archeological dig) written in Hebrew and in Greek you would see. "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple; anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." Welcome to church!

At the beginning of verse 14, I don't want us to miss this; Christ himself is our peace. In the Greek text, there's a strong emphasis on him reminding us that our new life has been given to us by Christ alone, through grace alone, received on faith alone. We don't earn it. It's a gift from God. Christ alone is our peace. Christ is the Prince of Peace. The divisions that have caused so much conflict in the world will fade away as one trusts in the gospel message and receives Jesus as their Lord and Savior. That's how we are transformed. That's how we become transformed. Every believer in Christ, no matter their background, gender, ethnicity, education level, or economic status, share a common union of peace.

So they went from being separated to having access through one act. And Paul tells us that that act is Christ's death on the cross. That's why Jesus says to us, as he warns us and warns his disciples before he goes to his death, he says, "Do this in remembrance of me." Celebrate communion, so you don't forget the act. So you don't forget what brought you all together so you could become the people of God. Celebrate it often. That one event brought two separate groups of people together into one new group. "... *by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations*" (v. 15a).

Remember, Christ didn't set aside the moral law. He came to fulfill that. And he did fulfill the moral law. He embodied the moral law, the holy law. He never sinned. He was righteous. And his righteousness is what justifies us through our faith in Christ—his righteousness, not our own. So Christ fulfilled the obligation of the holy law for us. Now we live under Christ.

So the law of Moses is no longer our rule of life. We are not obligated to do it. What Paul is saying here is that Christ set aside the hundreds of ceremonial laws and the misguided rules and regulations that didn't save, that didn't bring life, but brought heavy burdens on people.

He Created a New Humanity

"His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace," (v. 15b). I love this. He created a new humanity. The word Paul uses here for "new" is important. Paul uses an unusual Greek word, "*kainos*." Let me explain. I drive a

22-year-old Lexus. It's starting to make a high screeching noise when I start it up, and my mechanic says that it is an expensive fix. I don't know how much a 22-year-old Lexus is actually worth. If I were to buy a newer version of a Lexus, I would use another Greek word, "*neos*," for new, which means new in chronology.

So what Paul uses here is the Greek word *kainos*, which means newer of a different kind. So let's say I'm done with the Lexus, and I don't want that make or model anymore. I've had enough. I don't want a newer version. I want to get something totally different. I want to get a Ford F150 because trucks are cool, and I want to be able to haul stuff. I would be getting a completely new model.

Kainos is the word Paul uses here for new. He takes and removes the separation and makes one new, *kainos*. A new of a different kind. Not Jewish, not Gentile, but a new type of humanity. The people of God. That's us. A whole new people of God. A whole new, different kind created by God, out of two separate people of the same kind. A whole new people, a whole new creation. "... *and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility*" (v. 16).

He Reconciled the New Humanity to God

So first, what we see is he created a new humanity, which he then reconciled the new humanity to God. And then, through that, reconciled us to one another. So verse 16 says it through the cross, Jews are reconciled to God. Gentiles are reconciled to God. Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to each other in one body as one new people of God. Through that reconciliation, Jesus replaces hostility with peace.

Well, what does that mean? It means that Jesus' death put to death hostility. Jesus' death killed the hostility, the separation, the enmity, is the word often used there, between God and us. And Jesus' death killed the hostility between Jew and Gentile, and the profound theological word in this is reconciliation.

It means that the parties that were enemies now became friends. We were enemies of God before the gospel. We were enemies with one another before the gospel. His death made us friends with God and friends with one another—no walls of separation.

"He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (v. 17). Jesus came to preach to anybody and everybody—that was his plan all along. That's what he announced at the beginning of his ministry. We referred to that back in our Mark series. It goes back to what he said in John 10:16. "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

You see, Jesus never wanted to keep this as a Jewish thing. Religious people divide. Religious people ask for religious credentials. Jesus asks, "Are you saved? Do you trust me? Do you love me? Do you follow me?" It's a challenge for us and an

appropriate one, for sure, to view our neighbors, our baristas, and our colleagues all as potential sheep. All as potential sheep that the great shepherd died to save.

"For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (v. 18). No walls, only bridges shaped like the cross. No matter our past, we all have full access to God through Christ, with all of the privileges and benefits that go with that. We can practice the presence of God because we are drawn to him. We can be attentive to him because we're drawn by the Holy Spirit. So we who are far are now near. We who are separated now have access with all the rights and privileges. And now there's one final charge here.

We were foreigners, but now we're a blended family. *"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" (v. 19).* What Paul is saying here is that because of the gospel, this newly created people of God is a newly created family. The people we gather with, that's our family, our home. It's the place where we belong.

It's how Jesus says in Hebrews 2:12. *"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises."* We're his friends; we're family, and that is what really forms us. As Kevin reminded us, we're formed by how we spend our time, where we spend our time, and who we spend our time with.

We love what we love and what we desire forms us; what we spend time on forms us. So the exhortation here for us is to spend time with the family. For us to be formed as the people of God, we need to spend time with the people of God. Time in community with the people of God in addition to our gatherings on Sunday morning. As Brandon said, this may be the only contact you have with somebody sitting next to you in church.

Well, that's not enough to be a family. We need a family outside of Sunday mornings. A family is not characterized by perfection. It's characterized by grace and forgiveness. In families, we sit at the table and work through things. We don't push ourselves away from the table and stomp off annoyed. We stay together and work it out in order to become the people of God. We need to be with the people of God. Invitation to a Journey by M. Robert Mulholland Jr. is what our community groups were reading over the summer as we prepared our leaders for the fall series. In there, he wrote about D. L. Moody.

It was said that one cold and gloomy day, Dwight L. Moody, who was an evangelist in the 19th century, visited a man who had expressed some interest at one of Moody's meetings. Moody was ushered into a comfortable room with a blazing fire on the hearth. After some gracious, preliminary conversation, the man began to argue that it was possible for a person to be a Christian without participating in the life of the church. As he made his elaborate and detailed arguments, Moody leaned forward in

his chair, took the poker, and pulled a flaming coal from the fire and set it on the stone hearth. Moody watched as the coal slowly dimmed and went out. And then he turned and looked at the man without saying anything. And after a long pause, the man said, "Mr. Moody, you've made your point."

We can no more be formed in the image of Christ outside of corporate spirituality than coal can continue to burn bright outside the fire. When we're apart, we go dim, and we can burn out. If we stay together; we burn brightly. That's why the writer of Hebrews says this.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

To become transform people, every one of us needs a safe place. A safe place for authentic sharing. A safe place to be cared for and to care for others. A safe place to voluntarily come under and receive accountability in all areas of our lives on decisions, on priorities, goals, and on plans, to also receive encouragement, to keep on following Jesus. A place to confess sins, a place to admit our struggles, a place where we take apprenticeship to Jesus seriously.

In addition, our identity as the people of God means that we matter. Our contributions matter. Each of us has a unique contribution to offer the lives of others. And if we don't offer it, they miss out. If we resist investing in community, others miss out. If peoples resist investing in community, you miss out.

And you may ask, "What in the world do I have to offer?" I want you to ask someone who you respect that question. As a child of God, as with my identity in Christ, what do I have to offer someone else? Let them encourage you and enrich you

There's more. When we're going through the darkest times, that dark night of the soul experience, when circumstances seem dire, we need community. When we doubt, when it seems like we're trying to live out our faith, but it's more like we're just kind of probing blindly in the darkness, when there's more confusion and darkness than clarity and light. When we think that no one can relate to or understand what we're going through. And when everything tells us we need to run away, we need to run away from the people of God; we need to run away from community. When everything's telling us to do that, we must run toward community, toward the light, toward the clarity, toward the support in these times.

As we desire to reflect the people of God to our community, we need people in our lives who will listen, who will pray, and who will be present with us. There's so much power in just presence. We don't need people who will judge or write us off.

I tell our community group leaders at the beginning of the year, I say, "You know what? Your group members may not be in a crisis right now, but I can confidently say to you that quite likely, in the next 6, 8, or 9 months, someone in your group is going to be going through a crisis, and they will need a place to land—that's your group." Do you have a community that will listen, who will pray, and who will be present with you?

I meet with a particular guy every couple of weeks, along with a friend of mine, for coffee, and this guy is in a challenging situation. I've kind of been brought into it as well. I was just like, we've been talking about this and trying to work through this. I'm thinking, you know, I'm about ready to give up here. I'm about ready to give up and break ties here. But my friend said I couldn't give up on him. The Holy Spirit is in him. That was several months ago. And today, we see redemption and restoration, and my friend is doing everything but saying, "I told you so." It's beautiful. But the man needed my friend to listen and to pray and to be present with him and not judge him or write him off.

So our community groups are kicking off. We have 35 groups so far. If you're not in a group and if God seems to be tugging you that way, [click on the link](#). It's the people of God practicing community, and everybody's welcome.

So the Gospel of Jesus Christ is transforming us to become the people of God. There's a song that we sing in this church. It is the words from Revelation 5.

And they sang a new song, saying:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. Revelation 5:9

You purchased for God persons, people from every tribe and language and people and nation. The cross means that I'm included. I'm near to God. I have access. He moved the fence. No matter what rejection I feel. No matter my wounds. No matter my rebellion. No matter my failures.

I know that some of us are thinking here. "You don't know what's going on with me. I have kids I don't know. I've messed up my marriage. I'm a workaholic. I've wasted so much time." And I get it. For many of us, yesterday didn't look good. But remember, God moved the fence. God says, "If you are serious about becoming the transformed people of God, you are not beyond changing the rest of your story."

You may not be able to fix everything in your past, but you can look forward, and you can have a hopeful future because God moved the fence to include people like you and people like me. Thank God. And he says, "You're welcome. I love you."

Let's pray, Lord, we love you. We love your gospel. We love that you included us. Continue to form us. We want to represent you well as the people of God to glorify you, to draw people to yourself. Lord, meet us where we are right now with this gospel message and all the benefits and privileges that go with it. Speak to us, remind us that you moved the fence. We are a new people, new humanity. And thank you for the tools and the opportunities you give us to grow as the people of God. May we utilize those well. May we find community and understand the value of that in our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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