

United to God, united to one another

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[0 : 0 0] It would be worth keeping your Bibles open at that passage, if you have them in front of you, as we look through it together. I think there's a very real sense in which we're living, aren't we, in an increasingly polarized society.

So you can see that in a whole number of ways, whether you're kind of politically left-leaning or right-leaning, whether you support Brexit or remain. The whole issue of Scottish independence has kind of reared its head again.

And in all these things, it seems less and less like there is kind of helpful dialogue and understanding and interaction. And more and more that there is division, that there are walls being built up between people.

I read an article this week on the BBC talking about a government report, which warned that economic gaps between social groups in Britain were growing, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

And it said we almost are living in what it called an us-and-them society. Again, these divisions arising between different groups of people.

[1 : 0 6] And perhaps, if you're really honest this morning, and I found this really challenging thinking about this myself this week, perhaps if you're really honest, there are some people or some types of people who you personally don't have that much time for.

People who seem very different, people who seem to be kind of starting from a different page, people where there is this kind of barrier that we are building up, a barrier that might be displayed simply by kind of raised eyebrows, or that idea, you know, what would that person know?

That kind of plan to avoid people who aren't like us. One of the big ideas in Ephesians is actually the idea of unity. One of the big ideas, and we've already seen it in chapter 1, is that at the end of all things, everything will be united, brought together in Christ.

That the gospel brings everything together in him. And this passage that we're going to look at this morning, Ephesians chapter 2, shows really how kind of two dimensions, we're going to call it, of this unity are linked.

That in the gospel there is this kind of vertical dimension, that we're united to God. And perhaps that's what we often think of, but also, and what we perhaps often forget, is that there is also this horizontal dimension where the gospel unites us to one another.

[2 : 3 1] That the gospel brings people together, as well as people to God. And I hope we'll see this morning, as we keep on singing this letter, that actually these two dimensions are kind of inseparably linked.

It is the incredible truth of what God has done to unite us to him that enables and powers the church to be able to break down barriers and cross divides and demonstrate that genuine unity with other people that our world so often lacks.

And yet, which I think our world would agree is so important. And when it's seen genuinely happening, it's such an attractive thing. So we're going to look at these two dimensions then, this vertical dimension with God and this horizontal dimension with one another.

The unity that the gospel and only the gospel can bring in those. So first up, chapter 2, verses 1 to 10, this vertical dimension.

And we see here that through the gospel, we are united to God by grace. That we're united to God by grace. And Paul kind of lays out a pattern in both these sections.

[3 : 39] He speaks about what we were, what we are now, and what's the point, what the purpose of that is. So let's look through that first of all in this kind of vertical sense.

So in terms of our relationship with God then, what does Paul say we were? Well, he kind of starts this passage with a bang, doesn't he? His diagnosis is incredibly stark.

Verse 1, And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. Paul, remember, is writing this letter to Christians in the church in Ephesus.

And he says to them straight away here, Look, before you understood the gospel, before you knew Jesus, you were not a little bit lost. You were not just kind of heading the wrong direction a little bit.

You weren't just needing a gentle helping hand. You were dead in your sins, he says. And the point is that he's saying that they were totally helpless. They were entirely unresponsive toward God.

[4 : 39] They were like a corpse towards God. And so they were children of wrath. What does that mean? Well, it means that because of their rebellion against God, rejecting his way, doing things their own way, that they were deserving of his punishment.

That's what we spoke about earlier in the catechism. That's kind of the dark background of the Bible, that because of our sins, we deserve punishment. But beyond that, because of their deadness, because of our deadness, there's nothing we can do about that.

And that's the situation that all of us, without Jesus, find ourselves in, this brutal assessment that Paul gives, dead in trespasses and sins. And so why does Paul want us to be so clear on this kind of bad news, really?

Well, he's not just trying to make us feel miserable. He's not just trying to make us feel scared. His point is that he wants the church to remember that they are, or at least were, no different from anyone else.

They were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. His point is that there's nothing special about the Ephesians, there's nothing special about us in this room.

[5 : 58] There's nothing that in our own efforts has kind of set us apart. Nothing that we've done that has enabled us to discover God. Nothing that we could ever do that would make us worth saving by God, that we could earn it ourselves.

No, that we're all spiritually dead. Dead in trespasses and sins. That is what all of us were. Let's move on. What are we now?

That's the second thing to look at. Well, for those who trust in Jesus, verse 5, we read we're now alive together with Christ. You can see we've moved from death to life, from dead in sins to being alive with Christ.

And how has that happened? Well, the key words in this whole passage, really the hinge, I suppose, that moves these opening verses from this despair that we've looked at to hope from death to life is there at the start of verse 4 that we were dead in our sins, but God, it says.

But God intervened. But God had mercy. But God in his love made us alive. As a famous preacher from many years ago called Martin Lloyd-Jones, he says that these two words, but God, he says about them that, in a sense, they contained the whole of the gospel of Christ.

[7 : 23] The gospel isn't that we did this and God did that. It's that we were dead, but God, through Christ, brought life. Paul's emphasis is saying this is all God's doing.

It's by his grace. It's this love that we could never deserve. And it's only by putting aside our own efforts and trusting in what Jesus did, trusting in that rescue that he brings, trusting that fact that he took that wrath, that he took that punishment that we deserve on himself as he died on the cross, that he was our substitute.

And it's only through trusting in that, having faith in that truth, that we can be saved. And it's incredibly humbling, isn't it? That it's not about what we do.

We've not earned anything. It's only by faith. And even, Paul says, even that faith is not something that we can boast about. Verse 8, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing.

It is the gift of God. Even that faith, which kind of takes hold of God's grace, it is a gift to us from God. As we spoke about two weeks ago, this restored relationship with God is his work from beginning to end.

[8 : 39] And this incredible grace, this undeserved, costly love, this gift of God, which is given through Jesus, is what brings life. And it brings us life, not just here and now, but look at verse 6.

It has raised us up with Christ. It has seated us in the heavenly places. This incredible thing is that even here and now, we have this heavenly place with Christ, united to him.

And again, Paul wants us to remember it is not what we've done, it is but God who's moved us from death, dead in our sin, the way we used to live, to life, eternal life, found in Jesus.

So that's what we were, dead in sins, what we are, alive in Christ, but what's it for? Well, this has all been God's doing, but why has he done it? Well, we see there in verse 7, it is so that in the coming ages, he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Well, what is our salvation for? Why has God done this? It's so that in the future, his grace will be seen, will be recognized, that the whole of the cosmos, at the end of time, the whole of the cosmos will be able to see this evidence of God's goodness, of his love, of his grace, how incredible he is.

[10 : 03] Near where I went to school, there was a park, it had this huge monument, it's in Lancaster, called the Ashton Memorial, and we used to go there occasionally, I wasn't that interested in monuments, but it's a good place to play football, and it's basically a very kind of grand, and yet essentially useless, building, built over 100 years ago by a guy called Lord Ashton.

It's been called the Taj Mahal of the North, but I think that's slightly exaggerating, it wasn't that big, but it was built to show basically how much he loved his wife, it was also built to kind of show how wealthy and powerful he was, that he was the kind of man who was able to just build something this grand with no particular purpose.

It was to show really what he was like so that people could see that. What Paul is saying here, you know, God doesn't use a building, but he uses the church, that the people united to him as a demonstration, as a living and lasting monument of what he is like, his incredible love, his power, his kindness, the kind of God that he is who rescues those even that don't deserve it.

Last week, we saw about the church being God's inheritance, that the church at the end of time will display God's glory and wonder, not because of what we've done for him, but because of what God has done for us.

And that is the ultimate purpose of this unity, Paul says, it's so that God redeeming his people can reveal his character, can reveal his grace, can reveal his unlimited kindness and his glory.

[11 : 46] And what does that look like in the meantime? Well, it means people who've been moved from death to life, living out these transformed relationships, living out this new status that God has given them.

Our relationship with God is only restored by grace, it is through faith alone that we've been saved, and yet that faith never comes alone. In response to the incredible love God's shown in making us his people, Paul says, it's now our job to live as his people.

And that's what we see down in verse 10, at the beginning, rather than walking in trespass and sins, verse 2, verse 10, in order that we can walk in good works that he's prepared for us.

This new life that God has won for us and which stretches out kind of far, far into the eternal future, transforms our life day and now in very ordinary ways.

That's one of the big themes of Ephesians. That here and now we walk in these day-to-day good works that God has prepared for us, living these new lives that aren't to glorify ourselves but are to glorify him.

[13 : 00] And the question comes then, well, what kind of thing does that mean? What does it look like to live these new lives? And we see really a big example of that as we move on to the second half of this passage and go from this vertical unity between us and God to this horizontal unity between us and other people.

A key characteristic of this relationship with God is our relationship then with others. And so, through the gospel we're united to God by grace. Second, through the gospel we're united to one another by grace.

Verses 11 down to 22 we see this, what we're calling this kind of horizontal aspect. And again, it's that same pattern, what we were, what we are and what's it for.

So, what we were, the Ephesian church was a really kind of mixed church. Some of the people in the church had been Jews. The Jews were the people who we read about in the Old Testament.

They were people who in a way knew so much about God. They were the people whose ancestors had been rescued in the Exodus, that book we looked at before Easter.

[14 : 06] And so, some of this church were Jews but also many were Greeks or Gentiles which is kind of the Jewish word for anyone not Jewish. A lot of these people had come from a background of witchcraft or often pagan worship.

A completely different way of life. And so, in general, Jews and Gentiles they didn't have much good to say about each other. In fact, Paul speaks about verse 14 a dividing wall of hostility.

Again, verse 16, that word hostility. One author calls Jews and Gentiles the two most deeply separated categories of humanity in world history.

And so, perhaps we think our society is feeling increasingly divided. Actually, the truth is that division, tribalism, kind of us versus them, it is not a new thing.

It's part of our human nature. That at every point throughout history people have been butting heads. And that is how the church in Ephesus was, made up of people who are not just different from one another but who had been hostile towards one another.

[15 : 19] And at the root of this hostility and it remains the same today, it is people trying to find their identity in what is different about them. And so, the Jews had become very protective of what they saw as their special status, as a special people, with a special history with God.

They thought this set them above other people. They thought it made them valuable as opposed to other people who, like the Gentiles, clearly didn't have that. And so, they were looked down on, they were excluded.

And I think this kind of division comes the same way today. If we build our identity on what is unique about us and what makes us special, that, you know, I've earned this amount, I've supported these causes, I've made something of myself, I've been to church since I was age zero, if that's where our kind of identity is, well then by definition we're at best not really interested in people who are different, or at worst we look down on those people.

We are hostile to those people, we don't want to listen to them, we don't really value them, we try and avoid them. And so most of the clubs or the groups or societies in our culture are based around common interests, about spending time with people like us, people that share our views, are good, people who operate from a different worldview where we're suspicious of.

That's human nature, what we were, what the people who made up the church in Ephesus were, are divided people. But Paul moves on again from what we were to what we are.

[16 : 56] Our natural state without the gospel, without Jesus, is this division, between different types of people. But what we are now, Paul says, those who trust in Jesus are no longer divided but united.

And so just as the gospel unites us on this vertical axis, us and God, it unites us on this horizontal axis with one another. Verse 14, it says, Jesus himself is our peace who has made us both, and he's talking there about the Jews and the Gentiles, these two hostile parties, has made us both one, has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Through the gospel, a radically different and previously kind of opposed people are able to be brought together. Verse 19, that they're no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Those who were opposed are now together, and that is what the church should be like. The church should be a kind of a radical community. The church should almost be a sort of rag-tag bunch of people, people from every walk of life, people from every part of society, people with all different backgrounds and history.

They should all be brought together in the church, and that is not just because Christians are supposed to be nice to everyone, but it's because Christians recognize, as we said in that first section, that our relationship with God, that vertical relationship, is entirely down to God's grace.

[18 : 32] It's nothing to do with who we are. It's nothing to do with how we're brought up. It's nothing to do with what we've done or what the world thinks of us. It is only through the goodness, the love we don't deserve, that God has shown us through Jesus.

And that means that we come together on level ground, and there's only one way to God, and it is through Jesus. And that is the same for all Christians. So while society is keen to kind of separate people out into distinct groups or communities, in Jesus, we're brought together, we're made one.

It's like it says there, one new man in place of the two, making peace. We come together as a real community, because we have that same foundation foundation of what Jesus has done.

And that's what verse 20 is all about. All together we are built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. And the apostles and prophets were those who God first used to share the gospel, to write the Bible that we have.

And Jesus, it says, is the cornerstone. The cornerstone was that stone that was laid first. The cornerstone was that stone that everything else took its direction and shape from.

[19 : 51] And Paul is saying that that foundation of the gospel with Jesus at the very heart means that all the different people in the church are brought together. Not because we're identical, not because we're clones, not because we all have the same hobbies, but because we're all built on this same foundation, that we're part of the church together.

And so what's it for? The gospel moves us from being separate, kind of individualistic people, building ourselves up at the expense of others to instead being united with one another, this common dependence of God's grace, this common foundation of the gospel of Jesus, meaning that what unites us is so much greater than what pulls us apart.

But again, Paul moves on that same pattern, what we were, what we are, but what's it for? And this is what we're going to finish with this morning. This unity in the church is so important and is such a big deal, not because it is an end in itself, but because it serves God's purposes.

And this purpose is down there in verses 21 and 22. We're brought together to be this holy temple, verse 21. We're being built into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit, verse 22.

These are really speaking about the same thing. And the point here is that the temple had historically been the place where God's presence on earth had been seen in a special way, in a more tangible way.

[21 : 21] So if you wanted to meet with God, you went to the temple. If you wanted to really kind of see the reality of God on earth, you went to the temple. Well, the incredible thing that Paul is saying is that now people are going to see the reality of God, not in a place, not in a building, but in this new community, this new united humanity of the church, where God has brought those together who were previously opposed.

And the idea here is that as we leave this building this morning, anyone watching us walks out, looks and says, what on earth links all those people together? Sometimes do a bit of work in the library, and there's various different groups that use the library for different things.

There's groups from the nursery, there's a Lego club, there's a knit and chat group who don't seem to do much knitting. There's various other groups who all gather there, but I could tell you as people walking through the door which group they're going to be going to.

Some of them have the uniform of the nursery, some of them have a blue rinse on their hair and they tend not to head towards the Lego. These groups are fairly uniform in their makeup, but the church should not be like that.

The church does not have a type, or that looks like a churchy type person. No, the church is a people brought together who would otherwise not be together, who would otherwise even be hostile towards each other, Paul says, who would have different ideas about politics or Brexit, different backgrounds, different incomes, different interests, different family histories, and yet are made one in Christ, are built into this temple, this place where people see the reality of God, the truth of the gospel, a visible demonstration of a supernatural power at work, that God reconciles people to God, but also people to people, as we stand on that foundation of the gospel, with Christ as the cornerstone.

[23 : 34] The unity of the church in all its variety, and the church across the world has the most variety of any organization you can imagine, and yet that unity around the gospel is the evidence that the gospel works, that the gospel is a supernatural reconciling power from God himself.

This morning, if you're not convinced about Christianity, if you're still asking questions, I hope it's really clear from what we've been speaking about, that whatever your background, whether you consider yourself religious or not, whether church seems a normal thing to go to, or whether church seems new and a bit weird, I hope it's really clear from what we've been saying that you're incredibly welcome, I hope you felt welcome.

I also hope it's clear that our invitation is not for you to stop behaving in a particular way, or try and become more like the person sitting in front of you or behind you.

Our invitation is to accept this gift of grace found in Jesus, to have this vertical relationship between us and God restored through faith in him, through faith in that forgiveness and rescue, which is made possible by Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

That is what we're inviting you to, because that is the one foundation for everyone who is part of this church. That is the one way that we are united to God.

[25 : 04] But it is as that happens that it also unites people into this church community as well. And so whatever your background, whatever you're from, wherever you are on this kind of journey, we would love you to become part of that.

And also to say, you know, if you do know that grace, if Jesus is that foundation on which your life is built, well let's never take this remarkable unity for granted.

And yet let's keep on working to make this a community where actually that is shown and where it's lived out. It's so easy for us just to talk to the people we know, the people like us, even within the church.

I know that's a huge kind of temptation for me week by week. And the point is not to avoid those people, but to keep on thinking how can we express in day-to-day ways that boundary crossing unity that the gospel brings.

What does that look like? Just a few very simple ideas. It's just speaking to people that you've not met before. It's kind of being brave and speaking to some of the scary looking people that we have dotted around the room.

[26 : 16] It's kind of inviting people in to your life on more than simply an hour and a half on a Sunday. And it's doing all of this not just by kind of gritting your teeth or not saying oh the church said I had to do that.

But it's doing this by remembering the truth of the gospel that everyone comes to God on that same ground, on that same foundation. There is no kind of better or worse Christians here.

There is a variety of people which is great, but all sharing that key need of the grace found in Jesus. And it's that grace that unites us vertically to God.

It's that grace that also unites us horizontally to one another. Let me finish with the words of Jesus himself who says, by this people will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another.

And that is the kind of love that we want to put in action. A love that makes people ask questions. A love that points ultimately to Jesus as it is his grace that unites us to God.

[27 : 22] And it is standing together on that grace that unites us to one another. Let's pray. Let's pray.