

One in Christ

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Date: 13 March 2016

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[0 : 0 0] So if you want to keep your order of service open and the reading is there for us, we will look at this passage today in the light of what we've already been studying. In many ways, we can know and understand that there is a great focus of Ephesians. We've taken that very much to be verse 10 of chapter 1 in Christ, set forth in Christ in the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and on earth. So all of the letter is underpinned by that vision and by that hope of what Christ has done and what Christ is doing and what Christ will do. And therefore the letter is a great encouragement to us.

And it focuses a huge amount of its energy on the church and on the significance of the church and on the importance of the church and God's purposes and plans. And today I want to say that I will be stressing your need for one another and your need for help in the Christian life and my need for interaction and communion with one another and our need, corporate need to live the Christian life with one another, strengthened by one another, encouraged and helped by one another as is the focus of this section and the unity that this section speaks about. So I am going to focus on, there's many different focus you could have here, I'm going to focus on the nature really of gracing of the church and therefore is going to look like for us. It's been a good time to be out of the building that we have because that's not the church. The church isn't the building, the church is what we are together and it's been great that we can come together and we can sit in different places and meet different people and recognise that the church isn't even just about the meeting together like we do on a Sunday, it's much more, much broader and much deeper than that and I hope that the passage today will make that clear to us.

And so Paul here in speaking to the churches that he is bringing this letter to around the whole area of Ephesus and its surrounding is wanting to remind them of who they are and what they have and that's good for us. It's good for us when we've got the Lord's Supper tonight and it's important for us to focus on these issues. So he begins by asking them to do something which is a very common trigger in the Bible, common teaching technique he says remember. Okay, so remember who therefore remember he says in verse 11 at one time you Gentiles in the flesh and so on and he's asking this specific group of people within the churches in Ephesus because remember there's Jews who have come to Christ and there's Gentiles, non-Jews who have also come to Christ. He's focusing on the Gentiles at this point and he's asking them to remember the past. They are now Christians but he wants them to remember what it was like for them before they were Christians, before they were part of God's covenant family. And things weren't that great for them in the present. Okay, it wasn't, things weren't necessarily going swimmingly for them. So it's not like things were brilliant and he just says well just remember the past. It's in difficult times that often as Christians were asked to remember what we were before Christ. It's a bit like just now, okay, the few of the guys and when you walk in through the St Columbians just now, it's just like it's like a bomb site. The place is empty, there's nails all over the place, we've ripped out pews, there's dust at three inches thick. It's a nightmare and you look at it sometimes and you say what have we done? Things are not great there at the moment but then we've got to remember what it was like, some of us anyway, remember the leaks. We've got to remember the heating breaking down. We've got to remember the Sunday school classes that had to meet in the corridor and all of the things that triggered us to move towards renovating the building. We remember these things and it helps us. And when you're going through maybe a difficult time at work, you remember what it was like to be unemployed or struggles maybe just general day to day living that you've got your health and you remember times when you didn't have your health and how difficult and problematic it is. And it's the same kind of thing that Paul is asking the Gentile believers to do, to remember what it was like and he sums that up by saying to them and it's relevant for us because it was the same

thing that we, the condition for us was the same before we came to Christ.

He says we're far away, that's what we were. We were far away in verse 18 he says that and reminds them that that was their conditions. That they were separated from Christ and they were in verse 13, they were Jesus Christ. Once you who were far off, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. And so he's reminding them and he goes on to unpack what that was like spiritually to be far away from God and from His people.

They were separated from Christ, we're told that. They were separated from the blessings and the covenant blessings that the Jewish nation and the Jewish people knew as God's chosen people in the Old Testament. They didn't have that privilege and it's summed up by saying that they were people who didn't, they were without God and without hope in the world far off and they did not have hope and they did not have God in their lives. And there's some trigger words that are used in this passage, trigger words that are actually very powerful words today. They were exiled or they excluded or hostile and these are words that people know about and people are aware of today in our society and we can use them and remind ourselves of what it was like to not belong to Jesus Christ. We are far away from God and from His people. And it's important, oh yeah, that was going to happen, that was always going to happen. Remember what it was like before I spilt that in. Remember. It'll not damage anything. Anyway, sorry. Catch my thoughts again. We've got, it's very important for us to also recall our lives and remember the effects and the consequences of sin that were in our lives, the multiple exclusions that sin causes in our lives. Before we were in, we've to remember that we were far away from God. That's what we were. We were far away from God, prodigals. And within that there was a hostility towards God. It wasn't just that we were excluded far away from Him by distance and by who He was, but there was an antipathy towards Him. There was a hostility towards Him in our lives, far away from God.

[7 : 28] And we see and recognise that same diagnosis in the world in which we live that is without God, the unbelieving world, that it is marked by a far awayness from Him and from His people, from God's people, so that there's this constant sense of exclusion and hostility towards God. And we live in a world that is marked by, not exclusively of course, but is definitely marked by division and by not only being separated from God but being separated from one another.

That really marks, it's often how we mark our territory in the world in which we live. It's by divisiveness, whether it be ethnic or social or religious or cultural, we build wedges that separate us from one another. It's very much a mark of the world in which we live that we define ourselves by who we are not, by who we are not like and by who we will not associate with. And the world builds wedges that separate us from one another.

It does mean that we therefore turn towards particular people that we like and that is the way of the world. It's not an exclusive separation but it's very different from what we're expected to be in Christ and we'll come to that later. But we find in this world that there's a whole ethos of hate and separation and division and antipathy and being far away spiritually from God and from His people. Now sadly, I think we can by nature take that same sense of being far away and divided and isolated from other people and from God into the church. It's easy to revert to sinful nature within the church, within the community which is the church. And we can embed division into the church and we can revel in distinctions that separate us from our fellow believers. I'm not talking about theological primary truths here but it's possible for us to easily in our communities and I'm not generally wanting to talk about the wider church or the universal church or the invisible church. I want to talk about the community here in St. Clum as it's easy for us. In any community of believers that we're part of to become dismissive, to imagine what people are thinking or saying and building up a picture that separates us from us, to be driven in our community by fear or by insecurity or by longing for seeking out uniformity. I will associate with, I will be interested in, I will befriend those who are like me by nature, just the people that are like me. And so we can embed in the church the same kind of separations and dividedness and far awareness that allows us to be isolated, allows us to be comfortable and allows us to be divided out from people. That will always be a temptation and it's a temptation for us in the church. Can I remind you that when Paul is speaking here, he's speaking and going on to speak about unity because he wants to remind them that what they had before, was a characteristic of the grave, was a characteristic of spiritual death, was a hopelessness and was what led to isolation, hostility and godlessness in the church. He's speaking to the church here, he's speaking to believers and he is warning them and saying, he's reminding them this is not how we are to be because of how important it is to belong to Christ and be like

Christ and reflect Christ and that's what we'll go on to look at for a few moments. Because he then goes on, having asked him to remember what it was like not to believe, to be away from God and to be without hope in the world and to be separate, he wants them then to understand the present and from verse 13 to 18 he talks about what they now have but now in Christ, you who are once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ or he himself is our peace who made us both one, made us both one. He's saying us the Jews, the Jewish Christians made us both, you Gentiles and us Jewish Christians one, okay? That's the context that he's speaking into, the Jewish believers and the

Gentile believers coming to us, see a little bit more about that in a minute, the understanding of the position that we as Christians are brought near. Once in Christ Jesus, far off brought near, that is the essence of what he's saying and I wanted you to stop and think in your prayer of silence what that means, brought near to Christ. The amazing reality of the healing of being brought near and the amazing beauty of that to stop and think about. For me, an illustration, my family are far away, two sons in America and a daughter in Australia and what I love most, what I enjoy most in life is sitting by an open fire at winter when they're all home, when they're all brought near. That for me, that's the greatest human experience, not out of Christ but alongside Christ that I have or when having broken my knee and injury and for months not being able to run or play sport, to go back to play sport and to be brought near to a health again in that way. Or last Sunday evening to sit with seven or eight hundred people from the Gospel partnership churches, worshipping

God together is to me to be brought near to heaven, to experience just a tiny little bit with all its failings and faults of what it must be like. Brought near in Christ and we are told here that we are brought near to Christ and that's hugely significant.

[14:22] There's two kind of elements to it here, it says but now you're in Christ and you're being brought near by the blood of Christ. There's two elements to that because the Gospel, the Gospel is spiritual inclusion of the highest order. Okay, there's another buzz word, inclusion.

A lot of words about inclusion in politics and in the society that we live in but spiritually being brought near to Christ is spiritual inclusion of the highest order and it's both an experience and an event. It's an experience we are in Christ and the New Testament makes clear that speaking about a relationship we have with Jesus Christ. When we are brought near, we are brought near into, we have had a conversion, a transforming experience where we are brought into a tangible relationship with the living God in Christ. So we have this trusting, loving, real but spiritual, different from ordinary relationship with Jesus Christ is an experience. What a great privilege it was to, we ask people who are becoming members with us, whether they've been members elsewhere or whether they're professing faith for the first time to write down their testimonies. And so if I had the privilege of reading 11 testimonies over the last few days of people who are joining us this evening, what a privilege and all of them speak about the relationship. Many of them brought up in covenant homes actually and becoming Christians young who have this experience of knowing and trusting and living in relationship with Jesus Christ. That is being drawn brought near. And that happens because of the event brought near by the blood of Christ. Okay? Again, very relevant for us as we celebrate the Lord's Supper this evening. But the cross is the event that enables us to be brought near and drawn near to Christ.

Because it's in that time and space and history where Jesus Christ with the huge cost that was involved to set us free dealt with our guilt and what causes us to be far away from the living God and achieved something tangible there. So the event of the cross and the relationship of putting our trust in the risen Christ of the cross is what draws us near to God. We don't have a fuzzy dipstick faith. That's not what we have. We've not got some vague, general, kind of unrealistic hope beyond hope faith. It's based in the historical reality of the achievement of Jesus Christ and the cross as Philippians 2 which we were singing about speaks so powerfully brought near to Christ and brought therefore into peace. For he himself is our peace who has made both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. We have here references back to Isaiah 57 and the peace that Christ brings and he mentions peace four times in this passage. You know we've said about repetition before that often when these truths and words are repeated is because they're important and significant and God wants us to remember them. And so we have this horizontal peace and this vertical peace that is brought about by Jesus Christ and his work in the cross were reconciled in verse 16 to God and he says the Jews and the Gentiles are reconciled to one another. So there's a vertical reconciliation and there's a horizontal reconciliation that is God's peace. And what's great

about the vertical horizontal peace, the peace with

God and I'm not, I don't really have time to go into this at all, tell me much. It's not that Christ gifts us peace. We're told here that Christ is our peace. So it's in Christ that the conflict ends. It is because of Christ. It's through Christ. It's in His finished work that we receive peace. It's in Him, a relationship with Him, that the conflict comes to an end, that the hostility is broken, that we are made whole. He is whole.

And we are made whole through Him. And that is the major change when we come into relationship with Christ. We are brought into peace with God because of who He is. So there's this vertical peace. Y'all, you know about that. You know about the peace that Christ has won for us, that relationship, that friendship that we have with Him. Can I also say there's a horizontal peace and this is very much the focus of Ephesians and of this passage.

[19 : 36] That Paul wants this theological truth of peace, vertical peace, to be outworked in the congregations between Jews and Gentiles. Because he talks about this great wall of hostility. So this great wall of separations dividing wall of hostility. And the commentators of different interpretations of this, some refer to it as the great wall of the temple, which kept the Jews in the temple and the Gentiles out of the temple and was a dividing mark for them. Others have talked about the law, the ceremonial and also the moral law as being a great means of separation between the two, which Christ broke down. But what, and I don't really have time to go into that, but what I do say is that I don't think we grasp just quite how hostile the Jews and the Gentiles were to one another. Outworked because of the Jews believing that the law, ceremonial and moral and the temple and were the people of God and were privileged and they despised the Gentiles because they didn't have that.

You know to the point where they said, well we're just going to change the Bible a little bit and we'll say love your neighbour, but hate your enemies. So you hate the Jews. Sorry, you hate the Gentiles. And so the Samaritan women when she came to the well during the day and Jesus spoke to her, the disciples came up and said, what are you speaking to her for? The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans. They don't interact one with another.

There was complete and absolute hostility, separation and hatred wrong between these two peoples. So much so that for example a mixed marriage with a Jewish woman married a Gentile man or vice versa, the Jews would hold a funeral for that person because they were dead. It was a real deep seated hatred they had for one another. And Paul is saying Christ is abolishing the regulations of the ceremonial law. He's abolishing the condemnation of the moral law.

He's abolishing the power of the significance of the temple because the curtain is ripped in two from top to bottom and he is creating one new person out of the two. Remember last time we looked at this, we looked at us as Christians being God's workmanship, God's masterpiece. This is it. This is the masterpiece. He's creating one new person out of the two.

He's creating unity among his people from all kinds of barriers and all kinds of backgrounds and difficulties. That was utterly explosive in the first century and it's what made people come to faith because they said see how these people love one another. Previously they hated each other. How can we apply that today? Can we make parallels? I don't know if it's possible to make parallels between that particular hatred and division. It was very unique. But maybe if David Robertson for example, one of our ministers and the president of the secular society that he banters with all the time, if they became brothers in Christ, where the guy in the secular atheistic society can't stand Saul as in David Robertson as a preacher of the gospel, they came together. Or maybe Mexicans with Donald Trump or possibly ISIS with Israel, that's maybe the closest parallel. If the Syrian fighters came to faith and also those who were in Israel came to faith and were brothers and sisters in Christ, can you imagine that? Would that make the news? Would it be something of significance? The depth of enmity being broken in Christ. And you know ultimately that's no different from our own hearts. Because ultimately we are at enmity, sinful natures at enmity with God and it takes the miracle of the cross to bring us back to Him. So we are brought near. Therefore we need to live with this reality and with this I bring things towards a conclusion.

[23 : 45] We need to live with this reality into our futures as a people. Verses 19 through to 22. He says that we must live as people who are united. You know that's what we need to do. We need to practically out work what it means to belong to Jesus Christ. We have here Paul using various illustrations. So today you as a Christian, if you are a Christian today, if you are not, you need to be brought near to Jesus Christ. If you are not a Christian please don't just continue to be separate and

far away from Christ. You need to be brought near. Deal with your relationship with Jesus Christ and with what He says. But as believers we have been brought near and we know this peace, this dealing of hostility and of division and of separation that is exemplified in the Jews and the Gentiles coming together. You have been brought near and that changes everything for us. Can I say that our theology ought to entirely change who we are. It changes our lives. We don't just come to Christ, well 20 years I became a Christian and things have been just moseying along just quite fine since then. We are just the same except we are Christ's. No, a Christ demands of us that we are people who are being transformed. We are being sanctified. And that's why when we come together it's so significant that you participate, that I participate in our own sanctification as we listen and come under the word of God. So the theology of this passage which speaks about the church, Jews and Gentiles coming together into the church in Ephesus, should affect how we think of the church. So for us church isn't a consumerist concept that we look around and we pick and choose and we did the bits we like and then we leave when we go. Church is family. Church is community. Church is God in us and with us. And we have that here in these powerful mixed messages towards the end of the passage where he says that the church of Christ is like a kingdom. Where he says in verse 19 he says, so then you are no longer strangers far away or aliens outside of the covenant, but you are fellow citizens with the saints. So we're citizens of God's kingdom. Then he says we are members of God's family, members of the household of God. And then he uses this great illustration of this mixed illustration. So you've got a kingdom and a family kind of mixed together into a building, a temple actually, that we are a temple, that we are built on the foundations of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you're being built together right. Just imagine that Paul didn't write this to Ephesians. Just imagine God through his word is speaking to St. Columbus today and he's saying in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the spirit. Now I know that as wider implications,

I know that the church is universal and you know all these things, but for practical intents the outworking of it is the local church. So this amazing image of us becoming a temple as a people that God dwells in, that God lives in together. This is God's masterpiece. This is what he's moving towards in heaven. It's this chapter 1 verse 10 that uniting all things in him, things in heaven and earth where Christ dwells, that's what Revelation speaks about, Christ dwelling with his people and we are one people there so that the church is to be a reflection of heaven. So it's unity and unity in Christ is, or unity should be Christ centred. Absolutely significant built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, the word with Christ is the cornerstone. Now St. Columbus doesn't, sorry I'm using all the building illustrations but I've been working like a workman in the building so I feel like you know I'm not a soft-handed minister for a little while, I'm kind of this macho hard builder. It's great, I've loved it. But seeing the outworking or seeing sorry the skeleton behind the building is amazing. What a building is, how it's built is incredible and there are some like 12 pillars around the galleries or 10 but it's only six of them that are made of cast iron and steel and six of these are driven straight into the supporting walls and then down into the castle rock and we have recognized how important these pillars are. They are absolutely, they are our cornerstone as it were to the building and so Christ, the building all holds together and through these pillars and so the gospel, the unity we have in Christ is through Christ as our cornerstone okay, under the foundation of the word the apostles and the prophets, the Bible that we are given. So never advocating and we shouldn't advocate a Christless ecumenism or just a friendliness, hey we're a really friendly church, we love one another, we come together, it's great fun. That's not the kind of unity I'm speaking about, well that's good too, friendliness is nice, I'm all for friendliness.

But it is a Christ centred unity, it is based on the fact that we were once far away, we're now near and so it doesn't matter what cultural, social, international background or local background you have, the unity we have is in Christ and through the atonement. That's why for example the gospel partnership and the meeting and the worship we had last Sunday evening was so significant because it marks the unity that we have in the gospel in Edinburgh and there are no denominations in heaven, remember that, remember that. As we work together the unity is Christ centred and it's a unity we share of holiness. We are to be a people who are a holy temple in the Lord in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. So it's a mystical at one level, trinitarian unity and we are like no other organisation because we are a unity in Christ being transformed by the Holy Spirit and we are to be

united in that work and with this I finish, it's a unity in progress. I read this again this morning and I just thought there's so much I missed out here. Or maybe all the wrong emphasis and maybe some of the emphasis reflect my own thinking in different ways and I apologise for that. But it is a unity in progress. In other words we are being joined together, we're not yet the finished article, we're not yet in heaven as a community as a people and we need to work at this piece together. You know the building across the road, it's a work in progress, it's not finished yet but we haven't given up. There's discouragements and there's greater expense and all of these things but we know there is unity in progress and we are seeing unity so the bottom half of the building is nearly done and it really boosts and encourages you to see that happening at a very fundamental, basic and unimportant level maybe. But the gospel and the work we're doing here is one that we need to, there's always a danger of moving far away again isn't there? I've said this to you often here and maybe said it previously in other places. When people are drifting spiritually from God that will be reflected in drifting from their Christian relationships. They'll stop coming to church and they'll stop, they'll avoid the minister in the street, they'll cross to the other side, they don't want to see him because of the sense of guilt and they'll not be involved with the Christian. So there's a danger that we become far away again. We can let that happen, we can let it happen long before it happens outwardly, we can let it happen inwardly by being far away from Christ and one of the reflections of that is that we become far away from His people. It's easy for us to drift but for us we are being built here. This is the gospel community being built and we are all different and what I'm saying is what I said at the very beginning of the service, we need each other to grow as Christians. That's how God has ordained it. He's ordained that we are bricks in His building that must be joined together and grow into a holy temple. We will spend eternity together, we need one another as we live our Christian life. Grace changes things for us and we stumble with division and with cliques and with separation and with wrong attitudes and with judgmental spirit and we choose very often to separate ourselves from one another because that's what's natural to us. But this church turned the world upside down because Jews and Gentiles loved one another and came together not without problems and difficulties and reflected this new creation that they were both one and the hostility was broken down. Now that is what the church of Christ, the local church of Christ ought to be. We are not isolationist, we are not simply independent, we are a people together and as we are united and as we work at peace, just think of hostility in your life and in the church and ask is it godly? Before you write that email, before you tell that story, before you walk away from that comment, consider Christ and the gospel. And I believe as we do so, we will see this city turned upside down as we and our gospel partners understand this remarkable truth of who we are together and that we need one another's prayers and discipline and accountability and self-control and love and forgiveness, all of these things we need together, then I believe we will see a great transformation in this city and it's what we long for in our hearts too and in our community. I mean let's bow our heads together and pray. Father God we ask and pray that we would understand this remarkable passage or pray that as everyone reads it and looks at it again they might find as they look at it from different angles all kinds of different truths and different wonderful insights by your Holy Spirit. We can only look at a few today but we pray that you would unite us, that we would not be cliquish as a congregation, that we would work really hard at hospitality, at loving one another, at being patient, at going out of our way to welcome new people to us, to making them part of our family as we would in our homes. We pray that we would be see the depth of the theology leading to the simplicity at the surface in our lives, that the surface responses we have will reflect the depth of our understandings and that we would know what it means to be Christian and that we would understand the radicalness of this New Testament gospel. So often Lord forgive us for taming it, for making it just bland and run of the mill, for not being challenged to come out of the rut that sometimes we dig for ourselves in our Christian experience that is surrounded by comfort and by ease and by thoughtlessness but help us Lord God to live for you more and more. We rejoice that you hold nothing against us, that you forgive us as we come to a daily repentance and as we walk the walk with you. We thank you that you do not judge us like we judge one another.

[37 : 18] We rejoice in the glorious relationship we have in Christ because of the cross that we celebrate this evening at the Lord's Supper. It may be a great time of fellowship and unity together and it may you help us to work through our differences, our difficulties, our battles, our struggles and our longings and may Christ have all the praise and the glory. Amen.