

Transforming the Collective

REVIEW: We have been working our way through the book of Ephesians. Paul opened his book so excited about what God has done for us in Christ that he starts out by praising God for all the spiritual blessings He has given us in Christ. Then he then prays for the Ephesians to know God better by knowing and experiencing the spiritual blessings God has given us. Last week we looked at the walking dead - that is what we used to be, then we come to the key verse (v.4) "But God..."

INTRO: This morning we begin to turn a corner in Ephesians to a theme that we have not highlighted yet, but becomes very prevalent in the book. Ephesians is a great book because it is all about the church. Paul only uses the word church a few times, but the theme of the church is a major theme throughout the book. Think about what we have looked at so far:

- God, through Christ's work on the cross, has chose us to be a holy PEOPLE
- WE were predestined to sonship
- In Him WE were redeemed
- WE were sealed with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption
- That we would understand the power that raised Christ from the dead is the same power available to all of us - individual and the church
- Everything is under Christ's control - He is the head, the church is His body

Last week's message has both an individual edge to it as well as a collective edge. Paul is referring to all the people who read the letter, as individuals but also as a group.

TRAN: This morning we will see this idea of the group come to the front.

Ephesians 2:11-22

- I. Application first this morning
 - A. I know it is unusual to apply the text to life before we walk through the text, but we need to get a couple of things straight at the outset
 - B. There is a shift in the focus of this text which is corporate in nature
 1. The corporate nature was implicit in the last section, here Paul is being very deliberate in pulling out the fact that this applies to the people as a group
 2. One thing to note about the group - this group he keeps talking about IS YOU!
 - a) Unless you are Jewish - and last time I checked we didn't have any Jewish folk among us
 - b) This text is about Gentiles - that is the rest of humanity, and that means you and I

Transforming the Collective

- C. One of the things we often forget, and I have told you in the past is that the letters of the NT especially were written to groups of people
 - 1. What we in America especially do, is apply these verses individually
 - 2. WRONG! We need to get over our Americanisms of individuality, and embrace the corporate way in which the Christian life is lived out
 - a) We are all DESPERATE for real relationships - especially those that push us closer to Christ
 - b) Yet we can't get over our pride that we can handle things ourselves to embrace God's real design in relationships within the body of Christ
- II. The past - 2:11-12
 - A. The verses open with "Therefore" - many of you may know the adage, "What is the therefore, there for?"
 - 1. Paul is saying, in light of the fact that you have been made alive with Christ (all that was just said about them in the previous section of verses), I need you to remember one other detail
 - 2. Namely, that as a group you were separated from Christ
 - 3. Remembering is not a bad thing - as long as it serves to motivate you to greater things
 - a) By remembering pain in life we remember that we can make it through difficult circumstances - or that we can help others through
 - b) We remember people and events that shape us into who we are
 - (1) I remember fondly the Pastor I grew up under
 - (2) I remember the elders of the church in my last church that stood against massive opposition to follow God and do what is right
 - c) Some of you might think of that verse by Paul in Philippians "Forgetting what is behind, I press to take hold..."
 - (1) Paul is not contradicting Himself
 - (2) In Philippians, the forgetting is akin to not allowing the past to control you in a negative way - press forward
 - (3) In Ephesians the remembering is to remember where they came from so they can greater appreciate where they are now
 - B. When it comes to exactly what circumcision is, this isn't sex ed. class so go ask your parents
 - 1. In the OT it was God's special sign of being a part of the nation of Israel - being part of those that God had chosen
 - 2. The rest of the world did not practice circumcision
 - 3. In these opening verses it shows that the Jews
 - a) Used this as a point of pride about their chosen position with God
 - b) AND that they made fun of those that were not chosen like they were

Transforming the Collective

- c) To deal with this pride, Paul throws in a parenthetical statement “which is done in the body by human hands.”
 - (1) His point is that it is merely a human act - and while it was at one time a symbol of God’s chosen people, it is also one that people can do apart from God
 - (2) It was only by human hands - it was not a circumcision of the heart
 - (a) Romans 2:29a “No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”
 - (3) Paul was quickly putting the Jews in their place
- 4. Paul is showing the enormous privilege that the Jews enjoyed that at one time the Gentiles (remember that is us) did not
 - a) The Gentiles did not have a connection with Christ (true of the Jews as well)
 - b) They were exclude from citizenship in Israel
 - c) They were foreigners to the covenants of promise (what is in view here are all of the major promises God made to Israel)
 - d) They were without hope
 - e) They were without God (The God, not gods)
- 5. This brings up some interesting things for us to camp out on and think about
 - a) The pride of the Jews for their position of privilege was wrong
 - (1) They used to call outsiders names
 - (2) They had it in their heads that because they were God’s chosen people, they were invincible
 - (3) The fact is that their position got taken away from them and handed over to the Gentiles (Us) to make the Jews jealous - even though many miss that point
 - b) We are no less susceptible to that same kind of pride like the Jews
 - (1) We hear that God chose us before the world even began, and we can get our pride on
 - (2) When in reality that should humble us
 - (a) We did nothing for God to chose us - He just did
 - (b) We possess nothing that would cause God to chose us - He just did
 - (c) These are the kinds of realities that should WIPE OUT pride and turn us into humble servants for Christ

III. The turning point - Ephesians 2:13

Transforming the Collective

- A. This is almost a mirror of the last set of verses - Paul tells what life USED TO BE like
 - B. Then Paul hits the beautiful phrase, “But God...” in this case “But now...”
 - 1. Remember when the Jews used to laugh at you and you were outside of the promises of God
 - 2. NOW in Christ you were far off and are brought near
 - a) This is an allusion to Isaiah 57:19 “Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. "And I will heal them.””
 - b) It is also the fulfillment of this verse as peace has come to those far off - a reference to the Gentiles
- IV. The focus is Jesus Christ - 2:14-18
- A. Jesus Christ is our peace
 - 1. The peace between Jew and Gentile
 - 2. He made the two groups one group
 - a) Now theologically there is a debate as to whether Israel has become the church, or if the church has become Israel, or if Christ absorbed the two into a third entity unto itself
 - b) I am not going to get into that argument because we do not have time, but please be aware that it is out there - for now the point is less about the specifics (as often it is but we like to argue about that anyway) and the point is more that Christ accomplished the impossible (again) in bringing Jews and Gentiles together
 - 3. It says “He destroyed the dividing wall”
 - a) Be aware that there was an actual wall in the Temple in Jerusalem with signs (in Latin and Greek) on it that warned any Gentiles not to go beyond that point under penalty of death
 - (1) It is unlikely that this is what Paul is referring to
 - (2) Paul is writing to Gentile believers some 615 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies
 - b) Most likely, the dividing wall Paul refers to is the Mosaic law itself
 - (1) This idea is reinforced in the following verse
 - (2) “Setting aside in His flesh, the law with its commands and regulations”
 - (a) This brings up another debate as to what portion of the law was set aside
 - (b) Without getting into the debate, the best answer I have found is that the law as a covenant is in view - the Mosaic covenant, which God made with Israel is set aside in favor of the New Covenant that God makes with Jews and Gentiles alike

Transforming the Collective

4. The whole purpose of what Christ did was to bring the two together as one
 - a) It achieved peace
 - b) It reconciled both to God Himself
 - c) Putting to death their hostility to each other
 - (1) He preached peace to both
 - (2) Back to that far and near analogy
 - d) And by Him, both Jews and Gentiles have access to God
- B. Some of the implications of this are wonderful
 1. First of all, What has just happened here is that Christ has given us a place in which we belong
 - a) All of us like to feel that we belong - that we identify with some group or person or cause
 - b) This is why we have sports teams, we have dance academies, we have social clubs, social media, even groups within the church
 - c) What this text tells us is that we DO belong
 - (1) We belong to Christ
 - (2) And because we belong to Christ, we belong to each other
 - (a) A further reality that screams that barriers between us are broken down
 - (b) We are the member of a family - God's family
 - (3) This is a big reason why I set a family atmosphere here at the church
 - (a) We are a family - not in a creepy cult like manner
 - (b) But we are family that should be growing closer to one another, caring for one another, caring enough to confront when needed, caring enough to be confronted as well
 2. Second, God is not distant
 - a) Now to be straight, He never was - God is always with us at all times
 - b) But often we can come to think of Him as distant or unapproachable
 - c) God has always been the God who is seeking us out, holy, and gracious
 - d) But His holiness and our lack of it was a barrier
 - (1) Yet God, in Christ, bridged that gap
 - (2) He removed our sin, our hostility and our weakness so that we would be reconciled to Him
 3. Third, that we change our defining characteristic
 - a) Too often we define ourselves by race, color, gender, social and economic status, schools, Michigan or Michigan State, even religion
 - b) But those are not the defining qualities of our lives

Transforming the Collective

- c) The characteristic that should define our lives is that we are in Christ
 - (1) That we have experience His peace
 - (2) That we have been humbled by His love and grace
 - (3) That we see what we were, and then praise and glorify Him for what He made us to be
- d) Strangely, some Christians will argue that this peace and reconciliation thing only goes so far
 - (1) It is a spiritual reconciliation and does not mean that we actually have to get involved with people outside our comfort zones
 - (2) Seriously!?!? That denies the very gospel that we preach
 - (a) Look no further than Paul confronting Peter about his behavior with eating with the Gentiles in Galatians 2 to see that we must put feet to our faith
 - (b) It is not just a spiritual reconciliation but one in which we should look at one another by our number one character trait - that we are in Christ
- 4. One last one - Just because we are united in Christ does not eradicate diversity
 - a) Cultural diversity is an amazing thing
 - (1) Having been witness of worship in other cultures has been a wonderful experience
 - (2) I am a brother to all of those people - even if I prefer my white American way of worship, they worship different, not wrong
 - (a) One of the first rules of missions
 - (b) Things are not necessarily wrong, they are different
 - b) Now lets face it, we live in a pretty white section of America
 - (1) There is not a lot of cultural diversity to be seeking out in Almont
 - (2) But let's say that that begins to change
 - (a) Will we cloister up and remain a white only church when there is diversity to be had
 - (b) Or will we, in recognition of the fact that we are all in Christ, throw open the doors and welcome our brothers and sisters in Christ? Something to ponder.
- V. The results that Paul lists of what Christ has done - 2:19-22
 - A. The Gentiles (US) are no longer foreigners and strangers (an expression to mean just what it says - no sense in trying to see a difference in those two words)
 - 1. We are fellow citizens
 - a) We are accepted
 - b) We have all the rights as everyone else - Like access to God v.18

Transforming the Collective

- c) Paul is using one of a few metaphors here - in large part to connect it to the one he used in v. 12
- d) It brings to mind that issue of rights, of protection by a larger body, of safety
- 2. We are also members of God's household - a family metaphor
 - a) This is not just a legal acceptance
 - (1) Not just the cold hand shake of "Welcome to America"
 - b) We are part of the family
 - (1) It is a warm, loving embrace
 - (2) It is not just a Dad and Mom, but brothers and sisters like you have never seen before
- 3. This leads to another metaphor from Paul - which follows kind of naturally from being a part of the household - a building metaphor
 - a) This household is being built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets
 - b) AND Christ is the chief cornerstone
 - (1) As many of you know, the corner stone is important because it sets the tone for the whole building
 - (a) All other stones line up with what that stone sets as the angles, the lines, etc
 - (b) It is the most important piece
 - (c) Some cornerstones in ancient times weighed as much as 570 tons
 - i) It was meant to be a load bearing stone
 - ii) In fact, by the time of Isaiah, the metaphor included the idea of a place of refuge (Is. 28:16)
 - (2) Notice that Christ is the preeminent stone
 - (a) The apostles and the prophets are a part of the foundation of the building - by proclaiming the gospel (which comes from God)
 - (b) Some have tried to take this verse to say that some spiritual gifts are not in operation because they were foundational with the apostles - however, you have to do some huge hermeneutical gymnastics to arrive there - that is too much a stretch of the verse
- 4. This building metaphor takes a weird turn in the last two verses because it is a building that is growing
 - a) Buildings don't grow
 - b) The point is the building is a metaphor for the family of God - which does grow

Transforming the Collective

- B. Even in these last few verses we find more for us to pull out for our lives
1. Chief among them is that Christ is what the church, and by extension all of us individually, are centered on
 - a) The only reason we exist at all is because of Christ
 - b) There is no way the Christian church would have come to be, with its ideas of racial reconciliation, and reconciliation to God with Christ
 - (1) If it was not for Christ's death and resurrection, we have no reason to exist
 - (2) All other parts about the church are designed to point people to Christ
 - c) So that means that the church needs to always be checking its purpose, motives, activities, and agenda to make sure the it is centered on Christ
 - (1) Teaching and preaching should be focused on Christ
 - (2) Its activities should be focused on Christ
 - (3) When a church's teaching/preaching and actions are no longer focused on Christ, it is no longer a church
 - (a) It is quickly becoming a social club
 2. The final thing to see is that the church is its people
 - a) Too often we hear church and we think "building" - some people even think programs
 - b) Both are wrong
 - (1) When I have my guys group meeting, we are having church
 - (2) When a LifeGroup meets, the church is meeting
 - (3) When there is a Bible study, the church is in session
 - c) The other implications of the people being the church are huge:
 - (1) If the people are the church, all of its programs, including Sunday morning, that means the people are the participants - it is not just for a few "performers" for everyone else to watch
 - (a) All of us join together to worship
 - (b) All of us participate in the life of the church
 - (2) It also means that ministry is for everyone - NOT JUST THE PASTOR
 - (a) I'll be straight here folks, I NEED you to participate in ministry
 - (b) There is no way I can run the church and the YG both effectively the way God calls me to without your participation
 - (c) When the church (the people) do not see themselves as ministers within their church, the pastor(s) get burned out

Transforming the Collective

- (3) The final thing, and we will be done - People should be what we value
 - (a) My goal is for us to not ever have to speak of money to maintain the building
 - (b) My goal is that any time we speak of money here at church, it is because an opportunity has arisen to bless the socks off of someone by cash donation, money to repair something, a missions project, a missionary in a foreign land
 - (c) I never want the focus to be on maintaining the building
 - i) Maintain it, yes - keep it clean and in good working order
 - ii) But people should always be the focus of the church, and not just the church, but FCC