

“Are We Good?”

Introduction:

On the second Sunday of Easter this year, two weeks ago, Pastor Mark preached from the episode of Jesus meeting with his disciples in the locked room the evening of his resurrection. Jesus greeted his disciples with the standard greeting “peace be with you.” Pastor translated the word ‘peace’ for us using the current expression, “we’re good.” Pastor reminding us of the preceding events of Thursday evening before that when the disciples all abandoned Jesus at his arrest in the garden. Then on Friday, at the crucifixion itself, they were hiding in the shadows as they watched, many of whom weren’t there. On Saturday and Sunday both the men and women seemingly had given up all faith and hope, as if they never believed Jesus’ prediction of his own resurrection. We understand that the expression “we’re good,” usually has an unpleasant story behind it, one characterized by strained relationships created as a result of unexpected behavior or attitudes on the part of one or the other in the relationship. Jesus’ greeting assured his disciples that all was well between him and them.

If I were to ask one of you, “are we good?” for example, what would your first thought be? It wouldn’t necessarily be, “of course we are,” but rather the thoughtful question, “what’s he thinking about that would have created a break in our relationship?”

For the past three weeks our lessons have been working through the letter to the Ephesians with a concentration on God’s creation of “a new humanity,” created by His grace and mercy in response to human sinfulness. As we move into this week’s lesson we will begin by continuing this direction of the message, at it is given in this part of the letter, by looking at those things God has done to create the new humanity, some of which might be different from what we normally consider. But we will finish by looking at those things that God is expecting of us as our part of creating and becoming this one new humanity.

I. God’s part in creating the “new humanity.” Ephesians 2:11-16

Before we go into what the text says about what God did to create the “new humanity,” I want us to look at how we should see the “old humanity.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What language in v. 11 describes the division of humanity? From whose perspective is that division? Which aspect of human existence are these categories a part of: gender, economics, education, social, religious, etc.?
2. What terms would we use to speak of divisions in humanity based on that same aspect of human existence?

3. Look at v. 13. What language here is used to describe the division of humanity? What's first on the list?
4. In Paul's day which group was without Christ? How important is "excluded from citizenship in Israel" in terms of this new humanity?
5. How would it change the way you looked at people who are not like you, if you recognized that what's important is whether or not they're "separate from Christ?"

From this point on, we have the list of what God did to create His new humanity.

1. brought us near by the blood of Christ
2. destroyed the dividing barrier between the two groups (Jews vs. everyone else)
3. set aside the ordinances that were part of the OT law
4. making peace (for this we refer to the opening discussion—peace means destroying the barriers between people)
5. putting to death the hostility.

The "Reflecting God" reading for April 21, was a misprint saying we should read Galatians 2:17-22, when the comment was written on Ephesians 2:17-22, the second part of the text selected for today's lesson. The text in Galatians is where Paul says, among other things

through the law, I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (NIV).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How would you express the difference God worked in your life changing you from a "separate-from-Christ" person to an "in-Christ" person?
2. How has that change helped you to recognize that every other "in-Christ" person is your brother or sister in Christ and needs to be treated as such?
3. How does the change help you to recognize every "separate-from-Christ" person as the object of God's love and His wish that they become "in-Christ" persons like you?

Verse 14 presents us with the word 'peace,' and describes it from a Hebrew perspective with the expression, 'destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.' This is a figurative expression based on an actual wall between the 'court of the Gentiles' and the 'court of the women' in the temple in Jerusalem. Adjacent to the opening where all Jews had to pass from the one court to the other was an engraved plaque that said (in effect), "We cannot guarantee the safety of any Gentile who passes through this opening." We opened the lesson with reference to Pastor Mark's comments on Jesus' blessing of peace on his disciples, translating "shalom" with the expression, "we're good!" All of Jesus' followers would have understood the potential for a barrier between Him and them because of their behavior on the evening of his arrest, the day of his crucifixion and the days they had gone into hiding. In creating the new humanity, God expanded to all believers what Jesus did on that first Sunday evening of the day

of his resurrection—erased the barrier that sin had created between Himself and every member of the human race.

That idea brings us to part two of this lesson: what **we** have to do to maintain and live out God's new humanity.

II. The believers' role in the new humanity. Ephesians 2:17-22

Verse 17 presents a very unusual Greek construction involving two parallel indirect objects in the sentence. Normally, one would expect the object of the verb, in this case, "peace," to be spoken once which would connect the two groups of people being distinguished, because the message of peace is the same for both. The question has been playing in my mind for over 20 years as to why the word 'peace' is repeated in relationship to both groups. I had what I thought was a good answer until Monday morning, when I applied the concept of that 21st century expression, "we're good!" to the 'new humanity.'

Before the ministry of Jesus, any hostility between Jews and Gentiles was destroyed through assimilation—that is, Gentiles had to go through circumcision and adopt the ordinances of Judaism to become Jews and no longer be Gentiles. It was a one-way street. Gentiles had to renounce their past and become Jews. But that's not the "new humanity" at all. From the questions based on v. 13, we should recognize that all humanity, apart from the grace of God, whether Jew or Gentile (or whatever divisional language you would choose to use—white/black, rich/poor, educated/ignorant), is "separate from Christ." Whatever hostility there might be between various groups of people is the basic proof of the sinfulness of all humanity.

In verse 17, Jesus preaches peace as something we do, not just experience.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. When you were teaching your children to create peace with their friends, what did you tell them to do?
2. What would Jesus' message be if He's trying to create and foster peace?

The point here is that the walls have to come down on both sides.

Illustration: When we lived in France, we had a miniature Dachshund who was far bigger on the inside than on the outside. One house we lived in had a fully fenced-in yard and we didn't need to put him on a chain to let him 'handle his business.' Our next-door neighbor had a female German Shepherd. The two dogs were good friends. The barrier between our back yards was a fence on their side and thick hedges on our side. Our dog could work his way through the hedge at ground level and greet the Shepherd through the fence, but he couldn't jump over it. However, the Shepherd was a big dog and could jump the fence on her side and plummet through the hedge onto ours, so they be friends together. It happened often enough that we had to do what was necessary to take her around to the front, exit our yard by our gate, and get her back into her yard through their gate.

What am I saying with this illustration? There are two sides to every barrier between humans. Apart from Christ, all are outsiders. Jesus has to preach to outsiders on both sides of the divide, calling both to do what's necessary to tear down the barriers between them before anyone can say, "we're good!" The moral person without Christ and the immoral person without Christ both have some pretty significant barriers to work through, even after they become recipients of God's grace. Within Christianity, every group of believers has its unique qualities and doctrines that can easily become barriers between them and others. Our histories affirm that fact. Jesus is still preaching peace to all of us today. Our job is to be responsible to do what is necessary on our side of the barrier to create peace listening to Jesus as the Holy Spirit leads us, and trust Him to work the same on the other side.

It is interesting to note, that in Paul's audience, the Jews were the foreigners and strangers (the word 'strangers' is a bad translation, by the way, and I'll get to that in a minute). In the Roman empire, only Citizens would have been documented. Neither "foreigners" nor "strangers" would be. The first word, here translated 'foreigner,' is someone from another part of the world whom you don't know, whereas the other word is better translated as 'immigrant,' meaning someone in your neighborhood who is outside either your family circle or cultural heritage. A distinction for our present time might be that of the difference between a foreigner with a visa and one with a 'Green Card.'

In any case, we can't do anything about creating peace between us and God apart from faith in Christ. But we have responsibilities of building and maintaining peace between all our brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of theological persuasion, cultural background, or nationality or citizenship. That happens only as we break down the walls we have built up, living out the word of God that speaks to how we are to relate to each other, and joining others at the table, whether at the table of the Lord, or either our own or theirs. All of this is done through careful listening to the voice of the Spirit. That's what's vv. 19-22 are presenting us.

Conclusion:

Olivet was celebrating "unity week" last week. Thursday's Chapel speaker took the text from Isaiah from Isaiah 43:16-19, where God announces He's about to do a new thing. What the preacher said was that God may put us into an uncomfortable situation not because he's angry or disappointed with us, but so that we can have a better understanding of who He is. Making peace is always an uncomfortable situation, taking us out of our comfort zone until the kind of relationships God wants in this "new humanity" are realized. It's easy to recognize the barriers on the other side of the 'wall of hostility' between us, and when they're gone, we can say to the other person, "We're good!" It's harder to see the barriers on our side of the fence, because to us they represent accepted norms. But if we do our best to acknowledge those barriers and start to take them down, we might be able to rightfully ask the question, "Are we good?" Let's also listen to the answer. It could be, 'Yeah!' Or it could be 'Not yet.' Jesus is preaching peace to us so that we can keep doing our part until the response is "We're good!"