

A New Humanity

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[0 : 00] God, thank you for this opportunity to listen to you. Graciously enable us to hear your voice. Give us heads that can understand and hearts that are moved and changed that we might respond rightly to you for your glory.

Amen. Well, it's been a week when we thought, well, I've been thinking a bit about the power of baking. The top five most viewed programs this year on British television are all episodes of The Great British Bake Off and in an enthralling final, it was gym teacher Candice who came up with the goods and was crowned champion.

Sorry if that's a spoiler for you. We are five days on now. So for the contestants, it was the culmination of years of dedication to baking. They had a party.

Apparently when the show was on, obviously it's already been filmed, so they had a party at Salassi's house. They were all together, hosted by him. And here's what was said about it, the party underneath the picture there of them together.

The contestants will be lifelong friends. So the series has taken a variety of people of different backgrounds from different places. Some of them are wealthy, some of them are not wealthy.

[1 : 15] Different religions were represented, different ethnicities, and they've become great friends. That's the power of baking. But nobody would think, would they, watching Bake Off, you know what?

Baking's really powerful, isn't it? I wonder if baking might be the key to world peace. We wouldn't think that, would we? Let's devote ourselves to baking. Let's start giving our resources to baking, and let's throw our energy and money at it, because baking can bring people together, not just on the BBC, but maybe all over the world.

We don't think that. Why not? It's because people are divided by things that are much more deeply rooted, and that matter to them much more than baking ever could.

In fact, for those of us who have stress in our lives, one of the great attractions of the Great British Bake Off is that it is about something so trivial. It's just great to watch, because it's just baking.

That's what's good about it. And yet, if you think about it, what we long for, we do long for something in the world, don't we, that really could bring people together. What if there really was something that could take people from different backgrounds and different ethnic groups and different ages and stages of life, people who would otherwise never be able to get on with each other, and it could unite them and bring them together in a way that nothing else has ever been able to do that?

[2 : 44] What could do that? How could that be possible? Well, at St. Silas, we're in this series looking at Ephesians, this letter, and it's all about the church. And what we've been hearing is that the living God has this incredible plan in eternity to show the world how brilliant he is and how good in his character he is by choosing a people in Christ and giving them amazing blessings that they don't deserve, so that for all eternity, people will marvel at his goodness.

And if you're a Christian, you've been swept up into that incredible plan. And the section we're looking at this morning explains something amazing. Whether or not you're a Christian today, it's a really important thing to hear because it explains how it can be that the Christian faith can unite people who outside the church could never be united.

Now, in a city like Glasgow, I reckon, with the history that we've had in Glasgow with sectarianism and things, there's an obvious objection as we hear that claim, and it's that we've seen in history examples of where people have called themselves Christian and have actually been extremely divisive.

But what Ephesians 2 shows us is that wherever we see that across the world today or in history here, what people needed and what people need isn't less Christianity, it's more Christianity. When we see Christians divided in that kind of way, in horrible ways, it's because the truth of the gospel hasn't been grasped. It hasn't been accepted.

[4 : 28] It's not made a real deep difference to people. The truth is that only real Christianity can save the world. Why is that? It's because of the truth God tells you about yourself.

And as with a few weeks ago, when we looked at the beginning of chapter 2 a few weeks ago, we're now on the next little section, the news about ourselves starts badly. So that's our first point. Remember the hopeless state you were in.

Paul's writing to Christians here, this early church. And as we look at verse 11, just to be aware, Gentile just means you're not a Jew. So you're not ethnically Jewish.

If you're not ethnically Jewish, you're a Gentile. I guess that's most of us here. Verse 11. Have a look at that. Verse 11. 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.

Now what, let's just pause there. What Paul is doing there is he's picking up on one of the great dividing lines of all humanity. Maybe the biggest of all. It's between God's people of the old covenant, the Jewish people, and the rest of the world.

[5 : 40] So he's addressing the people who aren't Jewish by background and he's telling them how terrible their situation was. Let's see it. First of all, we were separated from Christ.

See that? Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ. Every Christian enters into a personal friendship with the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ.

And that is a source of joy, of love, of hope. And before you become a Christian, you didn't have that separate from him. Next, Paul says, you were excluded from citizenship in Israel.

So God had chosen a people to be his. They were his nation. And you weren't part of that. You were left out. If you look down next, we were foreigners to the covenants of promise.

God had made promises to those people, his people, the Jewish ancestors. He promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob that he would bless their descendants, the ethnic Jewish race, and that they would be his people and that he would be their God.

[6 : 49] He promised to one of their own, David, the king, that in his line, there would be a king that would reign forever. He promised to Phinehas, the priest, by covenant, that there would always be a priest to stand between God and his people.

These are promises to put everything right, to solve the problem of human rebellion against God. And we, not Jewish, were completely on the outside of that.

Couldn't get in. So he says, you were without hope. Yes, we might have had things we were hoping for, but we didn't have hope beyond the grave that God promises his people.

And he says, you were without God. In verse 13, he says, you were far away, far away from God. It's very confronting, isn't it, the first couple of verses of this passage to be described like that, to face the truth about ourselves away from Jesus.

It says, you've got nothing to boast about. You were in a whole world of trouble. And it's worth saying, if we find that challenging in Glasgow today to hear that, that it would probably have been even more provocative to hear if you were in Ephesus.

[8 : 04] You see, Ephesus was a great city of wealth, culture, reputation. It was more famous and more renowned than Glasgow is today. And Paul says, you, Ephesians, you were outsiders.

And they had a temple to Artemis that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And Paul says, you were without God.

It's important for us to grasp that. It's important because our Christian faith is meant to be at the very center of our lives. We're meant to be wholehearted about our faith in Jesus.

But one of the reasons we often don't feel excited enough about the Christian faith is we forget how bad things were for us away from Christ. We forget how things would be if we didn't have Christ.

So Paul says, did you notice what the command was? Remember. Remember that. Remember it. We were in the spiritual equivalent of the Calais jungle.

[9 : 09] Imagine if you were staying there last week as it was wrecked. You are virtually sleeping rough. You've got no right to remain in the country. You gaze on at lorries and trucks heading past every day, getting onto ferries to Britain where you long to be.

But you're far away. You're a foreigner. You're denied the privileges and rights that the citizens who drive past you have. You have no hope. That's what we were like spiritually.

Refugees. And what Paul emphasizes here is how divisive that was across the human race because it created a state of hatred between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Why is that? Well, in verse 14, he says there was a dividing wall of hostility between them. And if you look at verse 16, he says what it was. He says it was the law with its commands and regulations.

So the Jewish people had the law of God. They had the Bible and it was meant to be a gift to them to bless the world with. That if they kept the law, the world would think, wow, their God is the true God.

[10:21] I'm going to be with them. In fact, what happened was the law became incredibly divisive. And it's a representative case for the conflict we see all around us in the world today.

If you think about why did that happen and today, why does it happen? Often, when we see division in the world, it's because God gives us or gives a group of people a blessing or a strength or a privilege and what we do is we take it and we make it part of our identity and self-worth.

It might be our morality, our nationality, our ethnicity, our intelligence, that we got a first at university, that we got a master's degree. Whatever it is, we take it and we start to look down on people who don't have it.

We make it an absolute. We build our identity on it so that we can look down on people who don't have the same as us. So we see hostility all around the world, don't we, as nations turn in on themselves in Iraq, in the West Bank, in Kashmir.

I don't know whether you saw the news last week that in Russia, as part of the Future Defenders of the Motherland range of toys, they've produced a bed shaped like a book missile launcher.

[11:36] to encourage children to dream of being soldiers when they grow up. Closer to home, of course, we might not be buying those for our kids, but we divide politically, don't we?

We divide over the Tories, over the SNP, over the Lib Dems. We divide over Brexit and whether we think that was good or bad. If we end up with Indy Ref 2 in Scotland, we'll divide about that as well. and we'll feel a close bond with the people who are on our side and we'll look down on the people who think differently to us. We divide economically so we see the middle classes of Glasgow looking down with disdain on people who live in housing schemes where generations have gone by since anybody worked.

It's worth thinking to yourself, who are the people that you roll your eyes at? Metaphorically, inside, who do you roll your eyes at? So what's the solution for that kind of division, that conflict?

For the ways that you and I look down on people for being different to us? Well, it starts with being able to recognise the hopeless spiritual condition that you are in so that we're humbled by that and we don't boast about things.

[12:55] And our second point this morning is this. Grasp the power of the death of Christ. I don't know whether you remember if you've been with us but in chapter 1 Paul prayed this great prayer for us.

He prayed that we'd know God better. He prayed that we'd know God's, know the hope to which God's called us. He also prayed that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened to know the power of God for us.

And now we learn more about the power that God has for us in the gospel. In the first half of chapter 2 the focus was on the resurrection power, the power that raised Jesus from the dead. And Paul said you were spiritually dead and you've been made spiritually alive and ascended into heaven by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. And now we learn about the power of the death of Jesus.

You see that in verse 13. Just have a look. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

[13:55] 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.

In other words by dying on the cross Jesus Christ did away with the division between Jew and Gentile. How did he do that? Well in verse 16 he says that at the cross God put something to death.

You see that? He put to death their hostility. But it was Jesus who died on the cross. The way that God slew our hostility against each other the way he killed it was by verse 15 setting aside the law in the flesh of Jesus.

See our problem was that the law stood against us when we broke it. The law of God the good character of God reflected in his commands. I used to be a lawyer and when I was a trainee lawyer we used to if a company was buying another company you'd have to go into a data room to investigate the company.

It's obviously all done by computers now. So you go in this room absolutely full of files. Everything that there was to know about this company and you'd read them to check that there were no skeletons in the closet.

[15:11] Nothing about this company that you should know that would affect its value. Now just imagine if there was a data room like that of your life recording everything that you've ever thought and said and done for people to go in and read for God to see and judge you by.

The Bible says that God knows everything about us and judges us against the standard of perfection. And that data room of our thoughts and what we've said and what we've done is called in the Bible the unfavorable record of our debts.

And when Jesus died in our place at the cross God nailed it to the cross. He got rid of it. He cancelled it as Jesus took our place.

And the result is that what used to divide humanity the law that separated Jew and non-Jew is taken away. You see the Jews used to use their law to look down on the other people. Just like moralistic people today will use their moral code to look down on people who don't keep the rules they keep for themselves.

But the uniting power the gospel has is rooted in this wonderful truth that because of Jesus the way to God isn't through keeping his law. It's not through how good you've been as a person.

[16:26] So you can't look down on anyone. If you just look down at verse 15 from halfway through about Jesus his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two thus making peace.

And then given what we've heard so far verse 16 comes as a bit of a shock. Do you see that verse 16? And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility.

So just imagine you had these two groups in humanity. Imagine that God is up in the sky somewhere here and you had a group of people who were far away.

They're the Gentile people, the non-Jewish people, they're far away. And you had a group of people, the Jewish people, who were the nearby people. They were near God. They'd been given his law. And there's this dividing wall of hostility between the far away people and the near people who say we've got God's law and you don't have it.

So we are better people than you. And when Jesus dies on the cross he gets rid of that dividing wall. But there's another wall that he has to get rid of and that is the ceiling.

[17:38] Because the Jewish people couldn't keep the law. So they had to be reconciled. The answer was not for Jesus simply to make those people who were far away Jewish.

He had to create a new humanity in him who would know God for themselves thanks to his death on the cross. That is the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

And so the result comes in verse 17. It's why Jesus is the proclaiming king. It's why the Christian faith is a message to proclaim. Verse 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

For through him we both have access to the Father by one spirit. Can you see the significance of grasping what Jesus has achieved for you at the cross?

The more powerful the forces that shapes you and moves you the closer you will feel to people who've been moved and shaped by the same force. You get that? The more powerful are forces that shapes and moves you the closer you're going to feel to people who've been moved and shaped by that same force.

[18:50] And in being a Christian what you have from Jesus Christ as he made you new and reconciled you to God is something that's so deep it creates a closer bond with other Christians than race and hobbies and career and nationality and political views even than family can create.

So I'm a Christian first I'm a white British male a very distant second. You know where I'm from I'm from Middlesbrough in the north of England lots of us have left right?

It's not like Glasgow you know I'm astonished there may be in Glasgow born in Glasgow raised in Glasgow where do you go to uni? I stayed in Glasgow where do you live now? I live in Glasgow Glasgow's a great city people stay around in Middlesbrough we leave Middlesbrough and in any city like Glasgow it means that you've got the teesside diaspora the Middlesbrough diaspora what we do is we move to places like Glasgow and we meet up with each other and we never go back to Middlesbrough but we talk together with tears in our eyes about how wonderful Middlesbrough really is if only we ever did go back and it is you know it's amazing being from Middlesbrough it's the only place in the world where people speak English without an accent which is an extraordinary thing okay so it's this strong regional identity and we see that kind of identity all over the city don't we?

you've probably got one yourself but we see people in Glasgow from the highlands and islands with that strong identity people who are Polish and stick with people who are Polish the Iranian community in Glasgow and Ephesians 2 tells me that I have a closer bond with a Christian mother of six in Sudan than I do with the Middlesbrough diaspora in Glasgow you see what Christ has done for you is so powerful and so essential to you and so sufficient for you that it destroys the ways you once thought about who you are and the unique wonder of this compared to any other world view is that it completely destroys your pride as well you see anything else that you choose to build your identity on would let you look down on other people you know even baking gives you something to boast about Candice won the bake-off on Wednesday here she is and she said tearfully

I did it I'm good I'm good enough it was lovely it's united that group of people but I was thinking whenever Candice meets up with those people for the rest of her life can she not think to herself I'm good enough you weren't good enough you couldn't bake as well as me and it doesn't matter does it because it's just baking but what the problem is that whenever we choose to build our identity on something other than the gospel something that we have that other people don't have it makes us proud proud of my career boasting in my friendships thinking down on others who don't share my political views or my ethnic background and the gospel is the only hope for the world because this new identity from God is entirely a gift from him all based wholly on his grace as Jesus Christ came and lived the life we should have lived and died on the cross for us so it tells us you were a spiritual refugee you were stuck in the Calais jungle and it's as though the prince of a distant land came in the night one night and grabbed you and swept you away to his country and he says to you you can have my citizenship

[22 : 38] I've paid off all your debts so that you can be safe and secure you're home now come and meet your new family they were all rescued exactly like you were that's now the defining story of your life and the other people in your nation have it in common with you so remember the hopeless state that you were in secondly grasp the power of the death of Christ thirdly and more briefly this morning live out the miracle that is the church see now we hear about what Christ has created and there are three images and each one is more intense than the last and more close knit if you look at verse 19 consequently you are no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone in him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit so do you see the escalation

Paul begins Christian you're part of a new nation now fellow citizens of the kingdom of God but more intensely than that you're members of a new family now God's household brothers and sisters with the same loving father who's adopted you to live together as one and then it's not just that we have family ties he says it's like your stones crammed in together cemented to one another the new temple built on the apostles and the prophets that's what we have today in the New Testament and built on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ so the cornerstone is the marker for all the other stones they're to be more shaped more and more like him so all over the world we're seeing division and conflict but where people come to faith in Christ and come to grasp what that really means it miraculously creates unity I remember being in Israel and being overwhelmed by the political difficulties there and then I met Messianic Jews

Jewish background Christian believers and I met Palestinian believers from Muslim backgrounds who were now able to serve together and love each other even despite their history because the

gospel has brought them together what does the Middle East need?

it needs the gospel my friend Kate she ran an NGO that helped the governments in places like Sierra Leone and Rwanda to learn from British governance and get better at governing without corruption and getting better infrastructure and she's written a book about it and she talks about solving saving the world one paper clip at a time and it's brilliant when you read about what she's done with this NGO what she did and as I was reading it it was so good I started thinking what am I doing?

is it really worth giving everything for the gospel? shouldn't I be doing something like what Kate's doing and helping governments become less corrupt?

[25 : 56] well Ephesians 2 says of course it's worth it the gospel is the only real hope for the world it's the only thing that can really bring people together give everything to the gospel it's what the Middle East needs more than anything else it's what Glasgow needs more than anything else is the gospel the power of God in the gospel and closer to home as a church family can we take our new identity seriously see if we are really going to be a gospel centered church then we will long for and celebrate diversity in our church if our church grows and the people who come are different to us we would rejoice in that and be willing to change to help them settle in and be part of our family and the next time we feel that we're surrounded in growth group or at roots or with other people from St Silas by people who are very different to us and we find it really hard to get on with celebrate that because here is evidence of the miraculous power of the cross in bringing people together and finally let's just each be challenged by that what we've heard today individually remember that you've been taken from nowhere all by God's grace to be part of this miracle that is the church you're a citizen of a new nation you're a member of a new family you're a stone in God's temple does your life reflect that reality?

is it reflected in the depth of the relationships you have with other Christians? could you look to develop two or three relationships so that there is genuine personal accountability with a few of the people at St Silas to recognise that you're in the same building the same family as each other? could you transform your diary so that your priority becomes spending time with people from St Silas week by week investing in them practising hospitality even for people who are very different to you and if that doesn't excite you go back over Ephesians 2 this week slowly just take it a few verses at a time pray through it to let it sink in what you were like without Christ and the power of the cross in making a new humanity that you're now part of let's pray together Father God we are astounded by the depths of your wisdom and we praise you for your glorious grace and as Paul prayed in Ephesians 1 we ask for a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we know you better enlighten the eyes of our hearts we pray so that in looking at your work at the cross we know more deeply the hope you've called us to and your incomparably great power for us who believe may that be reflected in our church and in our own lives for the glory of your name amen and there we go can you can be