

Manifesting the Manifold Wisdom of God

One New Humanity (Ephesians 2:11-22)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on February 14, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ We're currently in a sermon series through the book of Ephesians that's been in conjunction with the new ministry theme we've introduced, "*Many in One: Diversity in a Unified Church*". And I'm excited about today's passage because when we decided that Ephesians would be a great book to go along with our theme, it was this passage we had in mind, as well as chapter 3 and stretching into chapter 4.
 - ▶ In this section of the letter, the Apostle Paul is highlighting the dual theme of unity and diversity. He's writing to a largely Gentile church in Ephesus, but there were Jewish believers in the congregation (cf. Acts 19:1-7). **So we're talking about a church where a dominant ethnicity and culture is visibly present, but there's the presence of a smaller yet significant ethnic or cultural minority.**
 - And there's hostility. There's division. There's tension. **So the challenge is to somehow unify the diversity and diversify the unity.** Sounds to me a lot like trying to lead an immigrant Chinese church!

- ❖ This morning's passage could not be more relevant for us. **You've probably heard it said that 11:00am Sunday morning is the most racially-segregated hour in America.** And some people are going to look at what's going on here and accuse an immigrant Chinese Church like ours of contributing to that problem.
 - ▶ But as I've said before, that's too simplistic. If you're only considering ethnicity, then you're glossing over genuine diversity found in a church like ours. **It's true we wouldn't fit the category of a multiethnic church, but we are a multicultural church.** There is genuine cultural diversity represented here.
 - There's a cultural divide between 1st-generation immigrants and the 2nd-generation children of immigrants. On the Chinese side alone, you have cultural differences between Taiwanese, Cantonese, and Mainland immigrants. And on the English side, we have plenty of Asians of non-Chinese descent and a small but growing number of non-Asians in our congregation.

- ❖ **My point is that it's naive to look at our church and suggest we're lacking in diversity.** There's a good bit of diversity already present, and having served in a Chinese church for so long, I can testify to the fact that, in a church like ours, real cultural divisions have been bridged – and are still being bridged – by the gospel. **So I don't think it's fair to criticize HCC simply for the fact that so many of us are Chinese.**

- ❖ **But I do think it's fair criticism if an immigrant church like ours simply ignores the issue of race and does nothing to challenge our members to pursue ethnic diversity in our own friendships and social circles.** And if we have a mature English-speaking congregation like ours and yet fail to do what it takes to create a space that is welcoming to non-Asians – simply because it's not comfortable or that it seems to hard...
 - ▶ If we sit on our hands and remain contently mono-ethnic when there are real opportunities before us to grow in diversity and reach our ethnically-diverse neighbors – then let us be accursed! What excuse would we have?

- ❖ But thank God that's not the kind of people we are. And that's not the kind of church we want to be. I've had enough conversations with enough of you to know that there is a shared burden to steer our church – particularly the English congregation – **in a direction where we have more of a gospel impact on the community around us.**
 - ▶ Where we have a space here that's welcoming to all peoples. Where we don't erase our differences or try to impose one dominant culture on others. But where we're grounded in gospel unity – while embracing and celebrating our diversity.
 - And all the while, we want to affirm and empower our Chinese side to continue the good work of evangelizing and discipling the immigrant Chinese in Houston. **That's part of our vision moving forward as *many in one*. As we pursue greater *diversity* as a *unified* church.**

- ❖ I thought it was very providential when I found out that many evangelical churches across America are observing on this day, **Racial Reconciliation Sunday**. What a perfect day to preach this passage!
 - ▶ To study it I've broken it down to three sections. 1) We'll consider the **problem**, namely an alienated humanity. 2) We'll look at God's **answer**, which is to create a singular new humanity. And 3) we'll ask how did God achieve his answer? And we'll see the **solution** lies in a bloody cross.

Problem: An Alienated Humanity

- ❖ Here in our passage, Paul is confronting humanity's greatest problem, which can be summed up in one word: alienation. **In our natural state, human being are alienated from God and from one another.** And a perfect microcosm of this universal problem can be found in the first-century hostility between Jews and Gentiles.
 - ▶ **To the first-century Jew, Gentiles (non-Jews) were unclean – not just spiritually but morally and socially.** The Jew wanted no association or contact with a Gentile lest you risk becoming unclean. This attitude made it easy to use derogatory terms, calling them “dogs” or (as we see in v11) “the uncircumcised”. This was a way to label the Gentile as “other” – as not just different than us but *lesser* than us.

- ❖ **Now on the flip side, Gentiles equally despised Jews for despising them.** For not getting with the program and assimilating. For insisting to be separate and not joining the Gentiles in their pagan practices. We're told in Acts 18:2, that prior to Paul's first visit to Ephesus (Acts 19), that Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome for some unidentified reason. It proves an anti-Semitic spirit was definitely present in those days.

- ❖ **But this mutual hostility between Jew and Gentile, this alienation, was not just in spirit. It was fixed in stone.** Literally. When Paul makes reference to a “dividing wall of hostility” in v14, it's likely he had in mind a notable feature on the temple grounds in Jerusalem.

- ❖ Picture it this way. Imagine yourself as a little first-century bird resting on the top of Herod's temple. The first thing you would notice is that the temple itself was situated on an elevated platform and surrounded by three courts.
 - ▶ Surrounding the temple was the **Court of Priests**, only accessible to Levite males. And around that was the **Court of Israel**, open to all other Jewish men. So you fly over these two courts and land on top of the Gate of Nicanor, which opens up to a third court, the **Court of Women**, which was as far in as a Jewish woman could get.

- ❖ Then you keep flying and reach the outer wall of the main temple complex. It's a large wall. Keep flying and you see a large set of stairs descending down to ground level. You reach another wall. And on the other side of this wall, you see before you a very area called the **Court of Gentiles**. And as you're sitting on this stone wall, only about 5-feet tall, you notice signs with a warning carved in both Greek and Latin that reads something to the effect of "Trespassers will be executed".
 - ▶ Archeologists actually unearthed one of these signs in 1871. It's in a museum in Istanbul. It's carved into white limestone and says, "*No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.*"

- ❖ This is the dividing wall of hostility that Paul likely had in mind. That's why I said this alienation between Jew and Gentile is fixed in stone. **There was a constant, visible, physical reminder for Gentiles that they were far off from God and God's people.** Paul says it this way in v12, "*remember that you were at that time (referring to the pre-conversion days of his Gentile readers) separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*"

- ❖ The mention of being aliens to Israel and strangers to the covenants (the promises God made to Israel's patriarchs) suggests that, **beyond the literal dividing wall, is a metaphorical dividing wall called the Law.**
 - ▶ Just look how it says in vv14-15 that Jesus broke down "*in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility* ¹⁵*by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances*". So that 5-foot wall around the temple is only a representation of the real wall, the real barrier, keeping Gentiles from Jews and from God. It's the Mosaic Law.
 - Particularly the ceremonial aspects: the required circumcision of males, the food restrictions, the cleanliness rules. Anyone who failed to keep these laws were considered unclean, and any contact with such people would make *you* unclean. **So you can see how the Law would contribute to significant social barrier between Jews and Gentiles.**

- ❖ And I can see why someone might blame God for creating this deep division, for contributing to the hostility. He should've just gave the Law to everyone. *Why did he just pick Israel as his chosen people and only make a covenant with them?*

- ▶ It's true that God chose Israel from among the nations and blessed them. **But the Bible says he blessed Israel so she'd be a blessing to the nations** (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). The Law is a gift. It shows you how to live a holy and godly life. And you're to live that kind of life and share the blessings of holiness and godliness to all peoples.
- ❖ But Israel failed her vocation. **She was given light distinct from the Gentiles in order to be a light to the Gentiles.** According to v12, the Gentiles were truly in the dark. They were truly separated from the Christ. They really had no hope and were without God.
 - ▶ That should've evoked sympathy and compassion among the Jews, but instead it became a reason to boast over the Gentiles rather than a reason to serve them. The Law – meant to be a gift – became a source of division and hostility.
- ❖ **Now remember we said what was happening between Jews and Gentiles in the first-century is just a microcosm of a universal human problem.** So let's consider how this is also our problem. Just think about how God blesses us. He gives us our talents, our strengths, our skills. The opportunities we have for an education, for a career, for financial prosperity are all gifts of God. Where we were born and to whom we were born are all gifts.
 - ▶ But instead of seeing these blessings as a cause to bless those without the same gifts and opportunities, something in us causes us to boast and elevate ourselves. We end up looking down on others and despising them. **The good gifts meant to bless us in order to bless others become a sort of wall, a source of division and hostility.**
- ❖ This doesn't just happen between individuals but between entire groups of people. **This is where evils like racism, sexism, and classism arise. It's when we try to derive an identity, a sense of worth and significance, in something God has given us.** We take something good about us, something distinct about our culture, and we elevate it to make us feel superior. We use it to lift ourselves up and put others down.
 - ▶ So I take my intellect, my academic success, my education level, and I try to make an identity out of it. **But I end up defining myself over against *what I'm not like* and *who I'm not like*.** "I'm not like those ignorant people, who are so unenlightened, who would vote for that candidate. What's wrong with those people?"
- ❖ Or let's say I've been instilled with the value of working hard because of my upbringing, my Asian parents. It's ultimately from God though. **But instead of using that virtue to bless and serve others, I carve an identity out of being a diligent, hard worker.** But then it leads me to despise other ethnic groups or social classes – to ignore systemic injustices – and to simply assume their troubles stem from their failure to work hard like us Asians.
 - ▶ *Do you see how we put up dividing walls?* It's not just first-century Jews. **We do the same in taking God's blessings and using them to lift ourselves up while putting others down.** That results in an alienated, separated, divided humanity.

Answer: A Singular New Humanity

- ❖ *What is God's answer to that dilemma?* That leads to our second point. **We see that God's answer to the problem of an alienated humanity is to create a singular new humanity that's equally reconciled to himself.** That's what we see Paul teaching. He says in v15 that God's answer is to "*create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace*".
- ❖ **Apparently the rift between Jew and Gentile is so deep that the only way for God to make peace was to make a new creation, a new entity, a new humanity.** The plan was not to turn Gentiles into Jews or Jews into Gentiles. It was not even to blend the two together. No, God's plan was to address the alienation, bridge the divide, and make peace between Jew and Gentile by making the two into a new person.
 - ▶ **If Jews saw the world in two categories, Jews and Gentiles, then Paul saw the world in three: Jews, Gentiles, and the Church.** The Church of God is comprised of Jews and Gentiles who have been born again into a new community (new humanity) that enjoys a unity that runs thicker than blood. We don't lose our blood ties between members of the same family or the same ethnicity, but those ties have been superseded by our spiritual ties in one Spirit.
- ❖ Later in vv19-22, Paul builds on this idea of God saving sinners into a new humanity using three metaphors. **First, he applies the metaphor of new citizenship in God's kingdom.** As a Christian, Paul valued his citizenship in the multiethnic, multicultural kingdom of God even more than his Roman citizenship. Which, in his day, was so highly prized and valued.
 - ▶ **American Christians and Chinese Christians both have to remember that Christian is your identity. American or Chinese is just a modifier.** The trouble is we often get that mixed up. We act like Christian Americans or Christian Chinese. To our shame, we elevate country or culture *over* Christ.
- ❖ **Second, he describes Christians as members of the same family, "the household of God".** I love my parents. I cherish them. But since they're not in Christ, there something profoundly missing in my relationships with them. Something I've found in you, my spiritual family.
 - ▶ **And the third and most staggering metaphor that Paul uses is that of the Church being the new temple of God.** He describes us as a building, founded on the teaching of the apostles and prophets, joined together by Christ our cornerstone, and growing up, "*into a holy temple in the Lord. ²²In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.*" Think about that. In Christ, Gentiles who were restricted to the outer court are not only invited into the temple but to be the temple! To not just get closer to God but to have God dwell in you!
- ❖ This is how Paul is trying to communicate the radical change that takes place when you become a Christian. **When you're created into a singular new humanity where you share a profound bond of unity between diverse people of diverse background.** But to be honest, for many Christians this is more a *theoretical idea* than a *felt reality*. The kind of connection we're talking about is something we really only experience with people like us.

- ❖ If I were to step into a group of complete strangers – if they're a group of Asian American strangers – in just a short time, I can feel right at home and be myself. It's not impossible in a group of non-Asians, but I won't lie, it's easier and faster. There's something about having a shared set of experiences and values and perspective that more easily unifies a group of individuals. I'm sure you've felt this too.
- ❖ **But what Paul is saying is that, in making you alive with Christ and reconciling you to himself, God is drawing you into a singular new humanity where you have a deeper unity with other Christians than anyone else.** So you're still Asian – you're still white or black or Hispanic – and you still feel a connection with those who share your own ethnicity or culture. You probably have more things in common with them. I wouldn't be surprised.
 - ▶ **But the deepest commonality, the most significant connection you share, are with those people who have also been saved by grace through faith.** Who, like you, have experienced a second birth. You share a stronger bond with a fellow Christian than you do with a person of your own ethnicity – even of your own family – who doesn't share that same faith.
- ❖ So the Middle Eastern refugee who only knows a few phrases in English, the Hispanic day laborer who waits outside a hardware store every morning, the 18-year old white New Englander who plans to vote for Bernie – I've got little in common with any of them. **But if they're in Christ, then we share the most important of connections.** We share an eternal bond more profound than the bond I enjoy with the friends I grew up with who don't know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.
 - ▶ That's what Paul is saying in v15. **Salvation by grace through faith is a miracle.** It's where new life is created among dead souls. But it's also where a new humanity is created among a divided race. That's a miracle. **True Christian community can only be explained by a miracle.** It won't make sense in natural terms.
- ❖ This is where we have to ask ourselves the hard questions. **When the world looks at Houston Chinese Church, do they see something miraculous or does it make perfect sense to them?** Sadly, more often than not, the world looks at us and gets it. A non-Christian will look at us and say, *"Yeah I totally understand why you guys love each other, why you care for each other. Because you have so much in common. You share a common ethnicity, a common culture, a common profession, a common education, a common political bent, etc. That makes sense. I feel the same way with people of my own ethnicity or culture, with people who share my education, my politics, etc."*
 - ▶ I find that troubling. **What binds a church together should not be so easily explainable.** But sadly, it usually is. That's why I long for the day when the non-believing community around us is baffled and left speechless by our love for one another. So when they look at our English service or visit a small group, they'll scratch their head and say, *"I don't get it. All of you are so different. I wouldn't have expected you to be so close, to be friends, to much less treat each other like family."*

- ❖ **God becomes more real and the gospel more credible, when our neighbors, our colleagues, our classmates, see God work miracles in our midst.** When God and the immeasurable greatness of his power and immeasurable riches of his grace end up being the only plausible explanation for our love for one another.

Solution: A Bloody Cross

- ❖ But the final question is: How does God actually do that? How does he achieve his answer to humanity's universal problem? God's solution is a bloody cross. **Paul's going to explain that it's the cross of Christ that breaks down the dividing wall, and it's the cross of Christ that kills the hostility and makes peace.**
- ❖ Look with me at v13, "¹³*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off [speaking of Gentiles] have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances*".
 - ▶ So Paul's saying that Jesus broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, and he did it by abolishing the law. And by that I again think Paul is referring to the ceremonial aspects of the law. Jesus abolished it. He set it aside. Not because it was a mistake to give in the first place but because he fulfilled its purpose (Mt. 5:17).
- ❖ **Remember, the ceremonial laws were given to teach one basic lesson: God is holy.** God is impeccably clean. And if you want to draw near to him, you have to be clean as he is clean. So the dutiful, law-abiding Jew keeps the ceremonial law and feels near to God, while his unclean Gentile neighbor is far off, separated, alienated. That's what it says in v17.
 - ▶ But notice something very radical that Paul says there. You can easily miss it if you don't read carefully. It says Jesus, "*came and preached peace to you were were far off (Gentiles) and peace to those who were near (Jews).*" So yes Jews are nearer to God than Gentiles. It was made clear in the architectural layout.
 - But it clearly says that both of them need to hear a gospel of peace. Both are not at peace with God. **Both need to be reconciled to God before being reconciled to each other.**
- ❖ Think about it. If you're a circumcised Jewish man, who perfectly kept kosher and all the cleanliness rules, you could pass through the wall surrounding the Court of Gentiles. You could climb those steps and enter the Court of Women. You could pass through the Nicanor Gate and enter the Court of Israel. But unless you're a priest, that's as far as you go.
 - ▶ And unless you're of the house of Aaron, you can't enter the actual temple. And unless you're the high priest, you can't go behind the veil into the Holy of Holies where the glory of God resides. If you trespassed, you'd be struck down dead.
 - **The point is that, even for the law-abiding Jew, there's still a dividing wall barricading him from God.**

- ❖ And the same would apply to us. **That means even if you do the right things, you keep the right rules, you're a good person, but there's still a wall between you and God.** Sure, in one sense you're closer than the drug addict, the prostitute, the criminal. Sure, they're further off. They're not at peace with God. But neither are you.
 - ▶ There's hostility in the air. Not just between fellow man. But God and man. Because of our sinfulness, our selfishness, our pride and partiality, our racism, sexism, or classism – because we don't love as we ought, because we make a mess of this world, – *we* should be killed. **God should kill us for our hostility towards him and towards others. But instead he killed the hostility.**

- ❖ Look in v16, his plan was to, “*reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*” On the cross, Jesus bore our hostility on his shoulders and received God's hostility in our place. He took our punishment. He died our death. And reconciled us to God. “*Through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*” (v18)

- ❖ **This is the gospel. And until you receive it and believe it, you'll keep putting up walls.** You'll keep dividing this world. Into people who are like you (they're great!). And “those people” – people who are *not* like you. And you do it because it makes you feel good about yourself. It gives you an identity, a sense of worth.
 - ▶ Look, your ethnicity is part of who you are, and there's nothing wrong with being proud of your cultural heritage. **But if your ethnicity or culture is at the core of your identity – if at the very core you see yourself as Chinese or Asian or white or black or Hispanic – that's a problem.** Because that's going to lead to pride, to a sense of superiority, to an elevation of you and your kind over against others.

- ❖ The whole point of this passage is that there's only one core identity that doesn't lead you down that ugly path, that doesn't tempt you to lift yourself up (or your people up) to put down others. And that's the core identity of *Christian*. Because Christian simply means: **Wretched sinner, far off from God, deserving of no good thing, only hostility BUT INSTEAD saved by grace through faith in the bloody cross, forgiven, accepted, loved and delighted in by my heavenly Father.**
 - ▶ If that's at the core of your identity, then your ethnicity is just ethnicity. Your culture is just culture. Your politics is just politics. It no longer defines you. It's no longer central to who you are. You don't need to defend it. Because you're a Christian.

- ❖ If the idea of becoming a church for all peoples – if that doesn't thrill you – you really need to ask yourself why. Look, it's going to take time. I understand why you might be hesitant to invite non-Asians to youth group or Sunday service. We're still so Asian. True, there are structural changes to be made at church. But you can start with your own home. Think about your dinner table. Just how diverse have the dinner guests been around the table? Start there.
 - ▶ But then as a church we'll have to ask hard questions: *How will we move in a more ethnically and culturally diverse direction? What sacrifices of comfort do we need to make? What dividing walls have we inadvertently put up that need to be torn down?*