

EPHESIANS: GOD'S BLUEPRINT FOR OUR SPIRITUAL MATURITY
EPHESIANS 2:11-22
2ND STREET COMMUNITY CHURCH
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www.2ndstreet.org

Welcome to 2nd Street. This is an important day in the life of our church body because this is the last Sunday of our fiscal year, and following our second service, we'll gather together for a meal and for an all-church meeting to discuss and move toward approval of this coming year's *Proposed Ministry Plan* and *Ministry Funding Plan*. If you were already planning on being part of this meeting, awesome. If you'd forgotten about it, or hadn't even heard about it, then I want to invite you to shift whatever plans you might already have, so that you can be part of it. Because, seriously, it just won't be the same without you.

This morning we're going to look into **EPHESIANS 2:11-22** and wrap up the second chapter of this amazing letter Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus Christ living in the town of Ephesus, on the western coast of what is now modern-day Turkey, in about 62 A.D., about 29 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If you weren't here for the two introductory teachings on **EPHESIANS**, tracing the beginnings of this church that Paul planted back to **ACTS 18-19**, I'd encourage you to download the manuscripts or MP3s of them from our website at www.2ndstreet.org ... and get caught up on the amazing story. What a great time in the life of our church family to come to this teaching ... because what we're going to look at in these verses this morning, connects just perfectly with what we're going through right now. And we'll see what I mean as we go through them.

So please turn with me in your Bibles to **EPHESIANS 2:11-22** and let's open up our hearts and minds to these twelve verses where Paul shares God's heart with us ... about how, even though we're divided by geography, vocation, skin-color, education, language, politics, and whether we like Bob Dylan, or don't like Bob Dylan, God wants us to find unity with anyone else who is in a living, breathing, growing, transforming, new-life relationship with Jesus Christ.

ILLUSTRATION ... Researchers James Patterson and Peter Kim report in their book *The Day America Told the Truth* that 70 percent of Americans say they have no living heroes.

Researchers for the *World Almanac* and *Book of Facts* asked 2000 American eighth-grade students to name prominent people they admired and wanted to be like. Those most frequently mentioned by the teens as their heroes were celebrities.

Commenting on this, former columnist for the Chicago Sun Times, Sidney J. Harris lamented the fact that every one of the 30 prominent personalities named by the students was either an entertainer or an athlete; noting that statesmen, authors, painters,

educators, musicians, architects, doctors, and scientists apparently failed to capture the student's imaginations. And Harris closed his column by saying that the heroes and heroines created by our society are people *who have made it big*, but not necessarily people *who have done big things*.

I'm with Patterson, Kim, and Harris, in believing that we've lowered the bar pretty far for who we adopt as our heroes. What about some of the heroes of faith found in the Bible? People like Abraham, David, Rahab, Esther, Mary, Joseph, and Paul? - people who stood up for their faith even though the price was huge?

I've always loved reading about the revolutionaries of the Christian faith - people like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Joan of Arc - and missionaries like St. Patrick, Ruth Bell Graham, and Jim Elliot. And then there's the encouragement I often get from modern-day spiritual giants like Kay Arthur, Rob Bell, Beth Moore, Tim Keller, N.T. Wright, and Frederick Buechner. I guess I've always looked at people like these as awesome examples of who I want to do my best to become more like.

But gang, the thing is ... this kind of thinking and "heroing" can really become a distraction to you and to me, because we already have the person we should be using as our role model - and His name is Jesus. And as I've read through and studied **EPHESIANS 2:11-22** this past week I've been reminded that you and I, as followers of Jesus Christ have the same access to the same Holy Spirit and the same Power as anyone I read about or learn about, or hold in high esteem. And this truth humbles and encourages me, and it brings us to our **FIRST FAITH LESSON** this morning ...

FAITH LESSON

Let's not set our hearts and minds on emulating or imitating other people. Jesus said in **JOHN 14:12** that it's His goal that as His followers, "we will do even greater things" than He did! So how short-sighted our goals are when we look at other people for examples of *who* to be and *what* to do and be in our life of faith, when we can look at Jesus Christ Himself and keep our eyes fixed onto Him.

Friends, I'm not saying that we shouldn't look up to people in whom we see the character of Jesus Christ and the will of God being lived out. But let's not let anybody ever begin to outshine the example of Jesus Christ. Because when we begin looking to people as our main example, instead of to Jesus, we'll always get let down. Nobody is perfect, or perfectly consistent in his or her walk with God. Not a one of us. We're human beings.

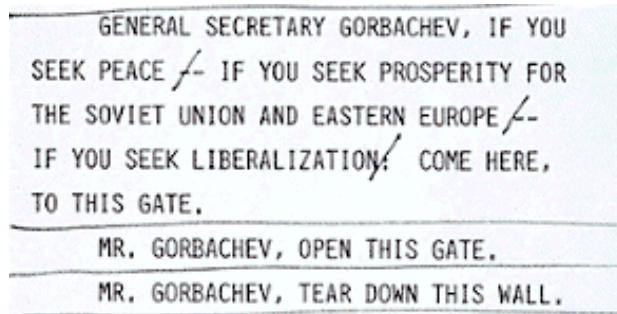
Friends, when we put other Christians onto pedestals. It's not good for them and it's not good for us. And also, when we elevate some Christians to this unnatural place of "near-worship", Christianity is then all too easily twisted into a club where people who aren't yet following Jesus Christ feel left out, shunned, judged, or ostracized. And it's to you and to me to make sure, as a church, and as the individuals who make up the church, that this doesn't happen.

“Insider” and “outsider” language is for the birds, as God’s promises for this life of faith He invites us into are made to everyone, everywhere. Understanding and accepting God’s gift of peace reduces our “rough edges” so that we can remove our defenses and stop being judgmental. Just as we’re reconciled to God in our decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ, so too, we are called to live lives of reconciliation with the other people in our lives. This can be an amazing pathway for others to come to Jesus, as we are reconciled with them first.

EPHESIANS 2:11-12 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹¹ Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” *which is performed in the flesh by human hands* -
¹² *remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

On 12 June, 1987 in Berlin, West Germany, President Reagan stood at a podium by a wall that 29 years earlier President Kennedy had stood before and decried. And Reagan challenged the General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev with some powerful words ... and here’s a copy of actual speech note-card ...



The people in Ephesus were mainly Gentiles - which was the title given by the Jews to anyone who wasn’t born a Jew. And most of their lives they’d felt judged by the Jews, told that God didn’t love them, that God only loved and blessed the Jews, and that they were lost and beyond all hope of ever being found or reconciled to God. So what a different message Jesus, and then the Apostle Peter, and then Paul taught. Let me give you some examples about what I mean about what these three men teach in the *New Testament* writings they left behind for us.

JESUS CHRIST SHARES GOD’S HEART FOR THE WORLD

FIRST, in **LUKE 4:22-27** Jesus was speaking to a crowd of Jews and He referenced two stories everybody gathered there that day knew all-too well. First, Jesus referenced the story of a woman only known as **the widow of Zarephath in Sidon** (roughly 25 miles South of the modern-day city of Beirut in Lebanon) who was miraculously ministered to by Elijah in **FIRST KINGS 17**. This woman wasn’t a Jew, but God’s love came to her through Elijah, and saved her and her son from starvation by meeting them where they were at and inviting them to put their trust in God.

When Jesus was teaching that day, He also referenced a story found in **SECOND KINGS 5** about a man named **Naaman, a Syrian with leprosy who God healed**. During Bible times, leprosy was a life-long disease, for both Jews and non-Jews, and much of the time people believed that God gave people leprosy when He was disgusted and repulsed by them or by their behavior. And when Jesus reminded His listeners of God's love and compassion toward Gentiles, or "non Jews" it really ticked off the Jews. In fact, it ticked them off so much that after hearing this teaching of Jesus in **LUKE 4**, they wanted to take Jesus out to the edge of town, stone Him and then throw Him off a cliff down into the Kidron Valley. Now I've given some teachings that weren't all that great, but I've never had that happen!

And as Jesus brought up these two stories of how God love and saved a non-Jewish woman and her son because He could see her heart of love and faith, and how God healed a non-Jew of leprosy, He drove home the point that when God looks at us, He doesn't see Jew or non-Jew, He simply sees everyone in His creation, including you and me as either "already in relationship with Him" or "not yet in relationship with Him." Jesus chiseled away at a wall that day. Do you see it?

PETER SHARES GOD'S HEART FOR THE WORLD

SECOND, in **ACTS 10** Peter visited in the home of a non-Jew by the name of Cornelius. It's an awesome story of how God led Peter to Cornelius, while at the same time leading Cornelius to Peter. Do you ever wonder how God plans things out and orchestrates some of the meetings, connections, conversations in our lives so that we'll discover more about who He is and what His plans are for our lives? Well, read **ACTS 10-11** and you'll get a front-row seat for an illustration of how and why God does this.

And in **ACTS 11**, some of the Jewish Christians living Jerusalem ... who were still trying to figure out what it meant to be born a Jew and then become a Christian ... they found out about Peter's little visit with Cornelius, and about what Peter had told Cornelius about God loving him and other non-Jews as much as He loved Jews - and Peter got into trouble. And here's Peter's response to them in **ACTS 11:17-18** ...

ACTS 11:17-18 (NEW CENTURY VERSION)

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Since God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I stop the work of God?" When the believers heard this, they stopped arguing. They praised God and said, "So God is allowing even other nations to turn to Him and live."

God used Peter that day to smash down the barriers that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles, and to tell his fellow-Jews that the transforming power of Jesus' love was for everyone - Jew and Gentile alike. A wall had torn down.

PAUL SHARES GOD'S HEART FOR THE WORLD

And then **THIRD**, in **ACTS 22**, Paul was explaining his ministry to a huge crowd of people in the Temple. He told them his history, and shared his testimony of how he'd

come into a relationship with Jesus Christ, and they listened patiently all the way through. But when he told them the Mission God had given him, the tables turned.

ACTS 22:21-22 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

²¹ “And He [*Jesus Christ*] said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

²² They listened to him up to this statement, and *then* they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!” [*emphasis added*]

The Jews hated the Gentiles so much that they wouldn’t associate with them, visit with them, or eat with them. And when Paul suggested that God would actually send Him to minister to them, for the expressed purpose of inviting them into relationship with Him, they became enraged to the point of murder. Paul had torn down a wall ... and some of the rubble landed squarely onto him. Tearing down walls isn’t for the faint of heart - but it’s something God calls all of His followers to do.

EPHESIANS 2:11-12 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹¹ Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” *which is performed in the flesh by human hands* -

¹² *remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

In v. 11 Paul says that by looking at the “outward appearance” of someone, that sure, we can see lots of differences, and divisions. But then in v. 12, he says that God looks at the “inside appearance” of folks, and that when we join God in having this focus and perspective, that a lot of the walls we’ve put up can begin to come down. Because the perspective that God invites us to as we look at others, is the perspective of hope and compassion that He has ... it’s the perspective I spoke of a minute ago, and it’s rooted in the reality that God sees all people as either “already being in relationship with Him through Jesus Christ”, or as “not yet being in relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.”

EPHESIANS 2:13-14 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into one* and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,

I love how Paul illustrates here the complete change Jesus Christ has brought about ... and how that the possibility of a love-relationship with God is available to all ... to the Jew, and to the non-Jew alike ... that there is nobody beyond God’s reach. We’ve been brought near to God through the blood of Jesus Christ, by His death on the cross. And the result of being brought near to God is that we know God’s peace, because Jesus Christ Himself becomes our peace. I love what Paul teaches us here.

It's simple truth that doesn't need much elaboration, because it's in its simplicity that it's power and truth ring out.

Lots of different religions teach there are many different ways to **come near to God**. On the other hand, many religions teach that we can only **come near to God** by keeping their set of rules, or by joining their group. But the only way to be **brought near to God is by the blood of Jesus Christ**. Because what Jesus Christ did on the cross, suffering as a guilty sinner in the place of guilty sinners like you and me, is the only thing that could ever bring any of us **near to God**. And Jesus didn't simply *make* peace between us and God at the cross. He, Himself, *became* our peace.

I read this verses and I have to admit that they challenge me to the core to examine myself ... and to be honest about how close I'm allowing God to draw **near me to Himself** ... and how much effort I'm putting into **drawing near to God**. I love how Jesus' half-brother James writes about this in **JAMES 4:8** ...

JAMES 4:8

⁸ Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, you hypocrites. (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)

⁸ Say a quiet yes to God and He'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. (THE MESSAGE)

Coming near to God, is about what God did first, and then it's about what we do second. And we don't just need to **come near to God** once, and then we're good. It's got to become the desire of our hearts to **draw near to God**, and to **stay near to God**. And I see a **SECOND FAITH LESSON** for us here this morning ...

FAITH LESSON

Let's stop kidding ourselves. We're only as near to God as we choose to be. Yes, God is close to us because God is everywhere. But God only changes our lives to the extent that we acknowledge His presence, accept His instruction, and obey His commands.

WE'RE ONLY AS SPIRITUALLY MATURE AS WE CHOOSE TO BE. So let's draw near to God, say a quiet 'yes' to God, quit dabbling in sin, purify our inner life, and quit playing the field.

EPHESIANS 2:14-16 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into one* and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,
¹⁵ by abolishing in His flesh the enmity [*a state of active disagreement, opposition, or hostility ... ie., a "family feud"*] *which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances*, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, [*emphasis added*]

¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

Do you see how this unity between us and God didn't just happen? It was God's intention to break the power of sin in our lives and bring us back into relationship with fellowship Him - and it could only happen through the hard-fought accomplishment of Jesus Christ at the cross. Remember when we studied **JOHN 17** together about a year ago now?

JOHN 17:21 (CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION)

²¹ [*Father God*], I want all of them to be one with each other, just as I am one with You and You are one with Me. I also want them to be one with Us. Then the people of this world will believe that You sent Me. [*emphasis mine*]

This whole chapter is the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He would be arrested and then crucified. But His words weren't "just" a prayer. They were a prayer Jesus prayed knowing what the work He was going to accomplish on the cross in the next days of His life would *bring about* ... and it was a prayer that Jesus was willing to pray even though He knew that *His own agony* would be used to bring about the answer to His prayer.

No more **enmity**, no more **family feud** between us and God, between us and others ... laying down the sword and picking up the white flag of surrender in order to know true and lasting **peace**. Let me ask you a very serious question ...

Are you able to say with integrity, "There is no division or enmity between myself and anyone else ... I'm at peace with God and with others, reconciled to them, and seeking to be one with them"?

The sad truth is that many people can't answer "yes" to these questions. Many of us have people who make our stomach hurt when we think about them. Many of us have people we avoid when we see them across the classroom, or at work, or at the store. And many of us get angry whenever we hear certain people's names mentioned. And in the midst of these realities I see our **THIRD FAITH LESSON** this morning ...

FAITH LESSON

Rejecting reconciliation is a sin because it creates a wall between us and God, and between us and other people, it keeps us deaf to the words God is trying to speak to us, it chokes out our fruitfulness, it stifles our maturity and our goal of taking on more of the character of Jesus Christ, and it hinders our prayers.

So saints, knock it off! Get right with God and with other people, and come into the peace and sanity God has for us as His children.

And now in **EPHESIANS 2:17-18** Paul explains how Jews and Gentiles unite.

EPHESIANS 2:17-18 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹⁷ And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near;
¹⁸ for through Him [*Jesus Christ*] we both have our access in one [*Holy*] Spirit to the [*God the*] Father. [*emphasis added*]

Just as God did during Bible times, He is still speaking to you and me through His Holy Spirit, through His Word, and through one another. How awesome that you and I can have **TOTAL ACCESS** to God because God cleared the pathway caused by sin, and tore down the wall built by sin. I love the word **access** in **EPHESIANS 2:18**. Listen to what 20th Century Bible scholar and teacher Francis Foulkes wrote about this word in his commentary on **EPHESIANS**.

“Access is probably the best translation of *prosagoge*, though it could be ‘*introduction*.’ In oriental courts there was a *prosagoge* who brought a person into the presence of the king. This is what Jesus Christ does for you and me.” - Francis Foulkes

v. 18 is another verse from God’s Word where all three members of the Triunity of God are mentioned together. Through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit **INTRODUCES** us to God the Father. **vv. 19-20** ...

EPHESIANS 2:19-20 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household,
²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*,

Every Christian in the world is a fellow-citizen with every other Christian because we’re all part of God’s family and God’s household ... and because we all walk on the same foundation of the Word of God, and Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our foundation. We’re all one, in One, and built on one. And we mustn’t be divided. Paul’s words remind me of what Jesus said in **MATTHEW 12:25** and what the writer of Hebrew wrote in **HEBREWS 12:14-15** ...

MATTHEW 12:25 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

^{12:25} Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking, so He said to them, “Every kingdom that is divided against itself will be destroyed. And any city or family that is divided against itself will not continue.

HEBREWS 12:14-15 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Try to live in peace with all people, and try to live free from sin. Anyone whose life is not holy will never see the Lord. Be careful that no one fails to receive God’s grace and begins to cause trouble among you. A person like that can ruin many of you.

Oh friends, I beg you to invite these words from Paul soak into your hearts and minds this morning. Jesus Christ, our **Chief Cornerstone** longs for you and me as His people to live in unity with one another. And if there's ever a time when disunity can come into a flock, it's at the beginning of a new ministry year, at the edge of a new adventure, and at the launching point of a new step of faith.

And so I invite you, to invite Jesus to speak His instruction into you this morning concerning your ego, and your fears, and your anxieties ... **come near to God** and He will come near to you ... cast all your cares onto Him for He cares for you ... and let Jesus' words from **MATTHEW 12:25**, and the words from **HEBREWS 12:14-15** shape and inform and chisel and mould you this morning and in the days to come as we live out our life and **MISSION** together as the flock God is calling us to be.

EPHESIANS 2:21-22 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,
²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Collectively you and I as the Body of Christ are a spiritual temple not made by human hands but made instead by God in the realm of the Spirit. What a beautiful picture Paul lays out for us here, of God's work of reconciliation, both in us as individuals, and in us as the church.

It doesn't matter what your background has been, what your failures have been, what your sins have been, or what the consequences of your sinful choices or for the sinful choices that others have made against you are ... Jesus loves you. And you don't have to remain a stranger or an alien before God. Jesus tore down the wall. There are no **SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS** in the Kingdom of God. There are only **CITIZENS** ... people who all stand as equals before God in His household.

NEXT SUNDAY ... EPHESIANS 3:1-13

Paul spent a lot of time in jail. What has the Christian faith cost people through the ages, and people around the world, right now? What is your faith "costing" you? Worship that doesn't lead to sacrifice is usually shallow and false, and must be avoided at all cost.

COME PRAYING AND EXPECTING

COME STUDY GOD'S WORD WITH GREGG AT THE CHURCH OFFICE ON THURSDAY MORNING FROM 6:00 - 7:00 A.M.