



Breaking Down Barriers

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Jesus breaks down barriers and unites forgiven sinners as one church.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Ephesians

Imagine going to your mailbox, opening it, and finding a stack of mail. As you cycle through the items delivered, amongst the magazines, catalogs, and bills, your hand and eyes settle on one unique piece. The envelope is smaller than the business envelopes in the stack, so this one feels personal. The stamp features a picture from your favorite story genre, and your name and address are handwritten. Of course, the return address makes it certain that this letter comes from a place of familiarity and affection. You tear open the flap on the back, pull out the pages, take a seat, and pore over the words.



What was the most moving letter you ever read?


Date of My Bible Study: _____

Group Time

Point 1: United in Sin (Eph. 2:1-3)

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Dead in trespasses and sins? Yes, dead. Apart from Christ, people are among the walking dead, in a spiritual sense. Death is a separation from and removal of life. Since all of life originates in God, death is separation from God and a fundamental characteristic of an unbeliever. Sinners have within them the sentence of death for sin as both a future reality in hell and a present reality on earth as they live and walk according to the ways of the devil. Can living apart from God, the source of life, really be called living? Not in a normal sense because we weren't made for sin and death.

 How does living in sin relate to death?

Lest we think Paul was targeting a specific group of people, he made it plain in verse 3 that we all have this same backstory of sin. Every one of us is born into this world with a disobedient nature, which characterizes all of humanity apart from Christ. Therefore, we all were “children of wrath,” deserving God’s judgment.



Voices from Church History


“Sin is the death of the soul. A man dead in trespasses and sins has no desire for spiritual pleasures. When we look upon a corpse, it gives an awful feeling. A never-dying spirit is now fled, and has left nothing but the ruins of a man. But if we viewed things aright, we should be far more affected by the thought of a dead soul, a lost, fallen spirit”¹

—Matthew Henry (1662-1714)


Point 2: United in Christ (Eph. 2:4-10)

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Paul made it inescapably clear that human beings desperately need a Savior because they are dead in their sins. This, of course, magnifies the greatness of God's mercy, love, and grace because we could never earn or deserve them. *God* made us alive with Christ. We receive forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and the promise of heaven as a gift from God because of the work of His Son on the cross. And we receive this gift not by our works but by faith in the works that Jesus has done for us. We receive this gift "in Christ."

 What are some objections that might arise as we tell people that we are saved by God's grace?

Why would God extend such mercy, love, and grace to undeserving, dead sinners? Nothing in our world comes close to preparing us for the lavish grace of God. So far beyond our frame of reference is our great God, and that is the point. Salvation by grace undercuts any desire and attempt on our part to boast in ourselves; instead, we can only boast in the Lord and give Him all the praise for His gracious work in us. And this work that is poured out on us in Christ is then poured out of us in good works for God's glory.

 How has your life changed as a result of meeting Jesus?

Point 3: United in One Church (Eph. 2:14-16)

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Paul shifted from the glories of salvation in the previous section to focusing on the church as a unified body, where God dwells by His Spirit (2:22). At this time, Paul was writing from prison, and he saw fit from his confinement to teach about Jesus as the peace who brings people together. Gentiles had been outcasts and outsiders to the Jewish community for centuries. Alienated from the true God, they were considered unclean. An ethnic, social, and theological barrier kept these two groups of people separated from one another, until Christ came and tore it down.

The tension between Jews and Gentiles caused problems for many in the early church. Often Paul was caught in the middle and threatened, imprisoned, and abused. Through the cross, however, Jesus tore down the divide between these two categories of humankind. Previously the law prohibited fellowship, but because Jesus came to fulfill the law and reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God by faith, now believers in the two groups are united as one family, one body, one church in Jesus Christ. The good news of Jesus always leads to good news for the church.

Body of Christ: The church is an extension of Christ's ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the _____.

In addition, the picture of the church as the body of Christ shows us the interconnectedness of individual Christians, with each member _____ upon one another for growth and sanctification.



What are some ways we can contribute to unity in the church?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Ephesians 1:1-23

After a brief greeting, Paul praised God for all He accomplished through Christ for our redemption and restoration (vv. 3-4). Paul thanked God for the believer's maturity in faith in Christ. By His glorious grace, people chosen from before the foundation of the world have come together in praise of His glory in Christ (vv. 6,12,14). He acknowledged the Ephesian believers are grounded in God's grace by evidence of their faith, love, and hope through the gospel.

Praise isn't merely a byproduct of receiving wonderful things from God. Praise and adoration are marks of God's grace on sinners, and for that reason, they ought to be a natural part of a believer's walk with Christ. God's grace awakens a song of exaltation in those toward whom God has shown eternal, unmerited favor through the forgiveness granted in the blood of Christ.

Finally, after thanking and praising God for what He has done, Paul entered into a form of prayer (vv. 15-23). He prayed that these believers would be full of spiritual wisdom and spiritual strength. He prayed that the hope of the gospel in Christ would enable the believers to endure with patience and joyful thanksgiving in the days to come.



How can Paul's prayer inform the way that you pray?

Day 2: Read Ephesians 2:1-3

The readers of Ephesians are reminded in these verses of their relationship to God before their conversion. Indeed, apart from Christ, every person on earth is spiritually dead and lost in misery and sin. But what does it mean that we were “spiritually dead”? People are separated and alienated from God because of sin. Because, apart from Christ, we live in this spiritually alienated condition, we follow the ways of the world by default (v. 2).

People live naturally according to their value system. Satan, who is called “the prince of the power of the air,” also plays a role. Under his influence, we act disobediently and rebel against God—as if we needed any help. As a result, we are objects and recipients of God’s wrath (v. 3).

Like everyone outside of Christ, we were under God’s wrath waiting to receive divine judgment at the end of this age. Without God’s rescuing grace, there would be no escaping this judgment of destruction. We would be hopeless. But God...



What areas of your life are most keeping you from wholly living for Christ?

Day 3: Read Ephesians 2:4-10

Aren’t you glad the truth doesn’t end at verse 3? Against this bleak backdrop of absolute hopelessness apart from Christ, Paul presented this glorious news of God lavishing His love, mercy, and grace upon sinners in Christ. His mercy restrains His wrath because of His great love for us (v. 4).

God in His great mercy has made His people alive together with Christ Jesus (v. 5). The Holy Spirit graciously made them partakers of Christ’s victory through no merit of their own. A life in Christ means someone is raised with Christ to experience resurrection power in the spiritual realm—God has “seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (v. 6). Why? Because of His rich mercy. God has provided salvation that is to be received by grace through faith (v. 8). This salvation is not by our good works but by Christ’s work alone on the cross so that no one may boast and claim the credit.



Why can we never overemphasize the role of God’s grace toward us in our salvation?

Day 4: Read Ephesians 2:11–3:21

Because of Christ, the church is made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers who have borne witness to the heavenly realm of the wisdom of God's eternal plan (3:10). Jesus has broken down the barrier and united forgiven sinners as one church. Jewish and Gentile believers are now considered one new man in Christ (2:15).

This is the church: a community elected for eternal unity to love, follow, learn, and worship God together. Through the gospel—through the peace of Jesus—not only are human beings reconciled to God but also to one another. The gospel breaks down barriers and unites those who have trusted in Jesus for salvation. Jesus has reconciled all who believe in Him into one body.

Because we have been joined together as one church in Christ, we work at tearing down any barriers inside the church that divide God's people as well as outside the church that hinder the gospel's advancement.



What do your actions communicate about the unity believers share together in Christ?

Day 5: Read Ephesians 4:1–6:24

The heart of the second half of Paul's letter is a practical description of growth in the Christian life. The second half is all about application, namely, showing how doctrine translates into the conduct of believers. Because of Christ's great work, God's people now can experience common unity with the diversity of the body (4:1-6). But so the Ephesian believers could have this peace, Paul commanded them to set their minds on things above and put to death the things of this earth (4:17–5:5).

Believers are not capable of these actions on their own but require the work of God. As a result, Christians should be marked by thankfulness. As Christians grow in spiritual maturity, this is exemplified in how they live. Paul began with the marriage of husband and wife, which is the central relationship in society (5:22-33). He then moved outward from there to parenting and even to slave-master relationships (6:1-9). Paul then concluded his letter by instructing the believers to have a Christ-rooted life in battling against the principalities and powers of the present age (6:10-20).



What is one step you can take today to have a more Christlike relationship with your spouse, children, family, or coworkers?

