

ALL-ACCESS PEACE

EPHESIANS 2:17-18 MAY 20, 2018

If I were to ask you to give me a few words to describe the current state of our world, think for a moment about how you might answer. 'Contented,' 'peaceful' and 'civil' are probably not on many of those lists. We live in a remarkably agitated and adversarial world. Some research shows that our own nation is becoming more and more divided.¹ It's been suggested that political polarization is the worst it's been since after the Civil War.²

The issue isn't unique to us. Certainly there are deep divides in just about every other part of the world and there have been throughout the generations of human history. Just look at the New Testament era, in which the Church was getting her start. You had this massive region ruled by Rome, in some areas mixing with barbaric paganism. You have the Christian Church starting to spread first from Jerusalem and Judea and out into the furthest reaches of the Empire. There was a great divide between Christianity and the religions of Zeus, Artemis and the like. Of course, we see in the book of Acts and the writings of Paul that there was the issue of Judaism and those who came out of it into faith in Christ. All of these factors made for a very fractured environment that was often so turbulent it would break out into violence.

What message does the Bible have for a time and setting like that? A time and setting that, surprisingly, doesn't sound all that different from the headlines *we're* bombarded with day by day?

Well, God's word has a *lot* to say to us, even in fractured times. I hope to encourage us today by spending a few moments in a wonderful couple of verses in Ephesians. This passage has been called a high point in this letter and there's no doubt about that. These verses are like a bright light at the end of a dark tunnel which not only give us *hope*, but help us to see things *clearly*. My aim is that as we're being encouraged by the great work of God on our behalf, this passage will help us to double check our *focus* as we're reminded of who we are in Christ and what that means for how we are to live.

Our text is Ephesians chapter 2, verses 17 and 18. Let me read it for us and then we'll pray.

Ephesians 2:17-18 - ¹⁷ And He [that is, Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

There are two words I want us to grab onto this morning from this text: **Peace** and **access**. These are life changing words and they are *world* changing words. What Paul is describing here is not some dry, procedural theology, but an explanation of how rich we are in Christ and how, by His power, we can experience the kind of freedom and unity and security that the world has so desperately searched for for thousands of years but has never been able to lay hold of. In the first of our verses, we see the peace. In the second, we'll see the access.

First, in verse 17, we are told about how *peace* was preached to us. Look at verse 17 again.

¹ <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

² <https://news.usc.edu/110124/political-polarization-at-its-worst-since-the-civil-war-2/>

Ephesians 2:17 - ¹⁷ And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.

Paul begins this letter by talking about how incredibly blessed Christians are to be in right relationship with God. How God makes us holy and blameless. How He not only saved us but *adopted* us as sons and daughters and has given us an inheritance. How, through Jesus, we have redemption, forgiveness of the wrong things we've done, and how He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing like wisdom and insight and letting us in on His will, not just to know it but to also participate *in* it. God demonstrates toward us what Paul calls an *immeasurable richness* of grace.

The Apostle explains that all of this (and more!) is possible because of the Person and power of Jesus Christ. And here, in verse 17, he says how the transaction occurred: He *came* and preached peace to we who were afar off and to those who were near.

Let's first take the back half of the verse. Those who were afar and those who were near. Another theme in this section of Ephesians is how God has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile. How in the Church, all are unified. It doesn't mean everyone jettisons their heritage and culture, but *no longer* is their a court for the Gentiles, a court for the women and a court for the Jewish men. All of those barriers and distinctions have been *removed* by God, who now brings *all* of us together into one body, unified by love. We're put together in the family as brothers and sisters, each carrying his or her own personality, but fused together by a common love for Jesus Christ.

But, let's notice this: Both the near *and* the far needed the same preaching and the same salvation. And though Paul was specifically speaking about Jews and non-Jews, it applies still today. If you're here this morning and you are **not** a Christian, no matter who you are or where you're from, no matter your background, how clean it is or how unclean it is, whether you grew up around church or this is your first time in one, it's all the same. You need the Gospel. It's the only way you can be saved. On Wednesday nights we were going through Psalm 77 and at one point the writer references God's redemption for both Jacob *and* Joseph. The cheater and the dreamer. The scoundrel and the slave. Both had equal *need* for redemption and both had equal opportunity to receive it. Those near and those far all have the same need and they all are sent the same message.

What is the message? Well, it's the one that was preached to these Ephesians: The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Though it's encapsulated in just a few words, we can see it right there in verse 17. Here's the message: Jesus, *Himself*, came. Stop right there. God looked down on fallen humanity and said, "I will go and make right what they have made wrong." There was no mistake on *God's* part. He wasn't cleaning up a mess *He* had made. But out of His infinite love for mankind He came to earth, took on flesh, lived a sinless life and died in place of anyone who is willing to believe in Him and accept Him as their substitute.

Paul continues and says, that Jesus "preached peace to you." What does this mean? Well, if we had time to go through the whole chapter, we'd see that Paul has *already* said that Jesus Christ, Himself, *is* our peace. That Jesus came and offered *Himself*, not just *for* us, but also *to* us. Christ gives Himself as Savior and Friend and Helper and Advocate and King. He makes us this offer: That if we enter into a real, personal relationship with Him, He will make us into new creations. He will transform our minds. He will put a new heart in us. He will give us a new destiny and new life to live.

To describe this message of the Gospel, Paul uses this word *peace*. It's a word that not only means the opposite of war or the opposite of disturbance, but also reconciliation or *harmony* with God. It's

a word that also would've reminded the original readers of the legal security guaranteed under the Pax Romana.³

So what does this peace mean for us? Well, if you're a Christian, it means you who were once at war with God are no longer at war with Him. And we have a daily guarantee of the love He has toward us. We can now live in *harmony* with God, which is a wonderful thing. But this peace also carries responsibility. Because, being in harmony means we are cooperating with someone. Harmony means to combine 2 or more notes in such a way that they produce a pleasing effect, that they are not *discordant*. And when it comes to our relationship with Christ, *He* is the King. *He* bought us. All His ways are good and perfect and we are to respond to His commands and His leading and His will. He's the One who sings the melody line. *He* has made possible the peace we enjoy with God, and now it's *His* melody we're to make harmony with, not the other way around.

Let me say it this way: When it comes to this life, we don't just play whatever notes we want. That's sure to produce dissonance in our relationship with God. Rather, we remember that Jesus Christ *is* our peace, and so we enjoy that peace by being imitators of Christ, followers of Christ, harmonizing our lives with His. Christ came and preached peace to us. Not only because we *needed* it, but because He is a great and generous God who wants to give us more abundant life than we could ever hope to make for ourselves. We couldn't even come close! But Christ came to give it freely.

Now, if the key works of verse 17 is **peace**, in verse 18 the key word is **access**.

Who has access to the president seems to be a favorite topic of the news media these days. Donald Trump's personal attorney, Michael Cohen, is under investigation over whether he was offering to sell access to the president to high bidders.⁴ This week I saw a separate story with this title and tagline: *An Evangelical Journalist Finds His Calling at the White House - David Brody has unusual access to the president.*⁵ I recall that a lot of hay was made earlier this year when the president's son-in-law reportedly had his security clearance downgraded and lost access to top-level briefings.⁶ Everyone seems very concerned about who is coming through the doors of the Oval Office.

In verse 18 of our text, Paul makes an *astonishing* statement about what Jesus Christ has done for us. He says:

Ephesians 2:18 - ¹⁸For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

What would you do if you had an hour of friendly, unrestricted, access to the president? Or a childhood hero? Maybe a supreme court justice or the CEO of your company. And not just for a photo-op, but let's pretend they *wanted* to meet with you as much as you wanted to meet with them. That they *wanted* to hear your concerns and even said, "Hey, ask me whatever you want to ask." That would be quite the opportunity. Things like that just don't usually happen. But here Paul explains that Jesus Christ has not only made it possible, but made it a *reality* that we have unlimited, personal access to God Himself through the Holy Spirit.

What does "access" mean? It means to be led into the presence of someone. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary* puts it this way: It means "the thought of freedom to enter through the assistance or favor of another."

³ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

⁴ <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/388062-cohen-asked-qatari-government-for-1-million-in-exchange-for-access-to-trump>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/us/politics/david-brody-cbn-news-evangelical.html>

⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43216602>

We have access to God and because of that we are able to gain and enjoy things that those *outside* the Body of Christ do not have access to.

Think of what an all-access pass confers to you. It grants you admission to places those without the pass cannot go. Maybe at a concert or a music festival. Those with an all-access pass get to be up close and personal with the stars. It's easy for us to take for granted that we *know* God. So many outside of Christianity are searching far and wide for some answer, some higher power, some clue as to what life is all about and where life came from. It's easy for me to casually think, "Oh yeah, I know who that is. It's God. I know all about Him." But that close access is only mine because Christ gave it to me. And it's a precious thing. Something people outside God's family are desperate for.

In some situations, an access pass might be your key to receiving greater information. In the US I'm told we have 3 levels of security clearance when it comes to governmental information. There's confidential, secret and *top secret*. Each level grants you access to greater amounts of information. Well, in the Christian life, we are granted access to a profoundly greater level of information. Because we have the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are able to understand the Scriptures and discern God's will. We're able to put circumstances and suffering into perspective and we're given *wisdom* that is unavailable outside of a relationship with Jesus. In fact, Paul said earlier in this very letter:

Ephesians 1:16b-17 - I pray for you constantly, ¹⁷ asking God...to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God.

This is a great, intimate access we are given. But it's not just a one-way thing. When God gave us access to Himself, it meant that He also had access to *us*.

One Bible commentator explains this access by saying this:

"The word Paul uses for access is a word of many pictures. It is the word used of bringing a sacrifice to God; it is the word used of bringing men into the presence of God that they might be consecrated to His service; it is the word used for introducing a speaker or an ambassador into a national assembly; and above all it is the word used for introducing a person into the presence of a king."⁷

Paul goes on in this chapter to talk about how God, having brought us into His household, is now building our lives and fitting all His people together as a dwelling place for the Spirit. And so, we are to bow our knees to the Father that He might do in our lives what *He* wants. What He wants to do is good, He wants to root us and ground us in love and to strengthen us with might, but as Christians brought into the presence of God, we must recognize that we're not given this access so that God will do what we want, but so that He can have *His* way, doing exceedingly *above* what we could ever ask or imagine.

So, in these 2 little verses, Paul has laid out incredible truths about what God has done and what that means for us. We see *theologically* how gracious God is and how generous He is and how we should be able to walk in secure, spiritual confidence. But in addition to that, there are a couple of practical points we want to think about. The first is the *personal application*: Are you enjoying the peace and access that Jesus Christ has made available to you? Are you enjoying the benefits of walking in intimate harmony with your God, who then fills you and directs you and empowers you and gives you wisdom, consecrating you for His service? If the answer is, "I don't know" then ask yourselves these questions: Are you filled with anxiety? Are you constantly confused about life? Do

⁷ William Barclay *The Letters To The Galatians And Ephesians (Revised Edition)*

you lack the security of your salvation? Do you feel as though God isn't speaking to you or using you or directing you? If your answer to these questions is 'yes', then Paul would have you know this morning that the Lord wants different for you. He *won* a better life for you when He took your place on the cross. And now He offers you peace with God and leads you into the presence of the Father. Take hold of these things with obedient faith.

How were the Ephesians to get hold of this peace and access? Some of them had been Jews, some of them had been pagan worshippers of Diana, now they were unified together in the Church by the Lord. They experienced peace and access through simple faith, but a faith that *obeyed* and *conformed* to the truth and allowed God to make them His workmanship. A *living* Christianity that actively communed with God in harmony and did not waste the precious gifts He has given.

And this testimony of the Ephesian Christians brings us to our second practical point to take from these verses. The first was personal *application*, the second is *imitation*. Remember what Paul had said at the start of verse 17: "Christ came and preached to you." But, how did that happen? Did the Lord Jesus appear to them, coming down from heaven in His glory? No. It was *Paul himself* who brought the Gospel to their city. It was *he* who shared the message of peace with God, access to the Father, unity of the Body. It was this man, who had access to God and God had access to him, and *he* was then introduced to the Ephesians as an ambassador sent from the God of peace. As Christians, that's one of our very important roles. To be *imitating* Jesus Christ in mindset and method and message.

So at this point the question for us Christians is: Are we proclaiming to the world a message of peace and access? Peace means freedom and unity and brotherly kindness *even with those who are very different than us*. Think of the disciples themselves! Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. They were united by the power of the Gospel. Those barriers between them were broken down by their love of Jesus Christ. Is our imitation of our Lord like that? Or has it become more like the Judaizers that plagued Paul's ministry for so many years? They said, "Sure, you can be united with us in the Church...as long as you become like us. As long as you put on these specific shackles of legalism. As long as you bow your knee first to me, *then* you're ready to have access to God." It's easy for us to slip into that sort of mentality if we're not careful. If we're not remembering that we are sent as representatives of Christ, the Christ who preaches peace and access. Freedom and reconciliation. A Gospel that does not erect barriers, it breaks them down and brings us together.

The world may be fractured and polarized, it always is. But that doesn't have to be true for us individually or corporately. It's *not* what God wants for His Body here on the earth. Instead, He's made a way that we might be growing more and more in communion with Him and growing more and more unified with each other and that we be imitating these great truths as we go through life announcing what God has done. That He has approached us, adopted us, enriched us and assigned us to be bright shining lights in a dark world, a world that needs peace. A world that God wants to grant access to everlasting life.