Opening Words

If people would embrace Christ, imagine the peace that would come as people find reconciliation with one another and unite in the new body that Christ is now creating.

34 Eph What Christ did for the World 2

What Jesus Christ did on the cross for us and what he is doing now is revolutionary. His great work on the cross paved the way for him to reconcile people to one another. If people would embrace Christ, imagine the peace that would come into families, communities, work places, schools, and even nations as people find reconciliation with one another and unite in the new man, in the new body that Christ is now creating. Think of the joy it would bring to so many hearts and think of the joy it would bring to the heart of Christ who prayed, shortly before he died that all of us would be united.

It's quite a task, quite a goal and at times it seems impossible, yet we know that God is big enough to make it happen, and we know that with him all things are possible. In the first century, Christ showed his masterful plan as he worked through the apostles, including Peter and Paul to bring peace between Jew and gentile. I want to look at that story to illustrate the text we have been studying. Let's listen to the text, first.

> 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (NIV)

Let's quickly review. When Paul says we have been brought near by the blood of Christ, he means we have been brought near to one another. It is true we have been brought near to God but the emphasis in this passage is our reconciliation with one another. Paul speaks of our peace – not our peace with God – but with one another. Then he talks about the enmity in commandments and ordinances. This is not enmity with God. You'll find that in other places. This is enmity with one another. Finally, he speaks of reconciliation with one another.

In the centuries leading up to Christ, the Jewish people thought they had learned their lesson. They had put away their idols. They were not like the nations of the world any more. They were seeking to adhere to the laws of Moses. They were keeping the Sabbath. They were following the dietary restrictions. They were practicing ceremonial cleanliness. They were offering the sacrifices in the Temple, and they were longing for the day when the polluting elements of the Greeks, Romans, and other pagans would be removed from the land.

Some of them suffered dearly for their adherence to the laws of Moses, none more so than the Jews in the year 167 BC when the crazed ruler Antiochus tried to get the Jews to adopt Greek ways. The Jews refused and a war with great suffering followed.

But as we know, the Jews went too far and when Jesus Messiah came, he experienced conflict with the Jews because of their overly strict interpretation and application of the laws of Moses. It seems there were hundreds of laws for everything. They had made so many new laws and rules that it was impossible to keep them all straight. It was impossible to remember what to do and what not to do. A person had to spend all day reading them, listing them, memorizing them, if he wanted to keep this endless list that was meant to keep a person pure before God. But did God really want it that way? Is that what God had in mind when he gave his laws?

There were rules about washing and being clean before God. If you went to the market, and bought a cooking pot from a pagan, when you brought that pot home, you had to wash it, or boil it in water, or purge it with fire. It is not because the Jews were concerned about germs. It is because they were concerned about the spiritual pollution of the gentiles.

When you ate your meals, you had better wash before and after your meal. You had to be clean before God, not clean from germs, but clean morally and the washing of the hands was the way to prepare oneself to eat a meal so that one was clean before God. Some would come to believe that it was better to walk four miles to find water to wash the hands than to eat a meal with unwashed hands. Some would come to believe that a person who did not wash his hands before a meal was as bad as a murderer.

Jesus distinguished between these man-made traditions and the Laws of God, and for that he was eventually labeled a false prophet and teacher and was arrested and executed. But we know that in his death he paid for our sins and uncleanness before God so that now all of us could come to God. When Jesus died something significant happened in the Temple. There was a barrier between God and men. This was the heavy curtain, the veil, that separated the holy of holies from the holy place and the high priest could enter the holy of holies only once a year with blood to atone for the sins of the people. But when Christ died, this curtain was ripped in two from top to bottom signifying that the way into the holy of holies was now open to everyone all the time.

But there was another barrier in the temple. This was a wall that had an inscription on it. The wall was a barrier that kept gentiles, even gentiles converts to Judaism, from entering further into the temple and it said this: “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

But when God judged the Jewish nation for their rebellion in the first century, the temple was torn down and this dividing wall was destroyed. This signified that there was no barrier, anymore, between Jew and gentile.

Paul is speaking of this inscription on this wall in verse 14 when he says that Christ broke down the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

This was a hard lesson for the Jewish people to learn, even the Jewish Christians. One day Peter was praying and fell into a trance. In his trance, he saw a sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals – some were clean and some were unclean. A voice told him, "Peter, rise up, kill and eat." But Peter refused saying he would never kill and eat an unclean animal. Three times this happened and three times God said, "Peter, what God has cleansed you must no longer consider unclean." As Peter wondered what this vision meant, some gentile men, servants of a Roman centurion who loved God came to his house and said that the centurion, Cornelius had a vision of an angel who told him to ask for Peter to come to his house to preach.

Peter quickly made the connection between his vision and the vision of Cornelius and on the next day he went to this man's house, preached to him and his family and friends and Peter was astonished at what he saw. Even as he was preaching, probably before he even finished his introduction, the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that indwelt him came upon Cornelius and his family. They all were saved. Peter baptized them and he marveled that gentiles received the Spirit of God without having to become circumcised and without having to become Jews.

Some people took issue with Peter for baptizing gentiles without first making them Jews. But when Peter told them what had happened, how could they argue with God? God was giving salvation to the gentiles just like he was giving salvation to the Jews.

Some years later Paul and Barnabas went on a mission trip and they observed the same thing. God's Spirit came mightily upon the gentiles, God's Spirit did miracles for the gentiles, God's Spirit saved the gentiles and when Paul and Barnabas returned they told everyone these amazing stories. But not all the Christians were happy with this. Some Jewish Christians believed that the gentiles must be circumcised, i.e., they must become Jews to come into the body, into the commonwealth of Israel, into the family of God.

And so, the apostles convened a great council where there was much debate, and, thanks be to God, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas won the day. They proved by their stories and by the Old Testament prophecies that what God wanted all along was not a Jewish family only, but he wanted a worldwide family where Jew and gentile were on equal footing with God, were reconciled to God, and were reconciled with one another.

It still took time for everyone to get this. Peter, later lapsed back into the mistake of not partaking of a meal with gentiles, but Paul confronted him and told him that his refusal to have a meal with gentiles was a denial of the gospel. It was cutting across the purpose for which Christ came. And courageous Paul worked tirelessly throughout the world to establish these new Christian communities where Jew and gentile worshipped together in one Spirit to God. This was Paul's great mission – to preach to Israel that they must repent and to preach to gentiles that they must repent as well and come together in humility at the foot of the cross as one new man and as one body in Christ.

And this is Paul's message in these verses.

My friends, Christ paid the ultimate price that he might establish a worldwide family of people of all races and genders and nationalities and languages. This was what he promised through the

prophets. This was the goal of the promises to David. This is what he promised to Israel when he wanted them to be a kingdom of priests and this is what he promised to Abraham. This is what the Church is and this is what God calls us to live and experience with our families, with our churches and in our communities to the glory of God. This is a wonder of the spiritual world!