

RH Sermon 10.25.09

## **Race Relations in the Church**

Text: Ephesians 2:8-22

### **Introduction.**

Good morning everyone. Go ahead and open your Bibles to Ephesians 2:8. We're going to spend most of our time in Ephesians today, but before we turn there, I want us to take another quick look at what we call "The Great Commission" in Matthew 28 so that we can see something important about the mission that Jesus has given to his Church.

#### ***Matthew 28:18-19***

*And Jesus came and said to [his disciples], "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."*

I want to call your attention to that word *nations*. If you are like me, then when you read the word *nations*, you immediately think of *countries* like France and Nigeria. But is that what Matthew had in mind when he used the word *nations*? The answer is NO.

The Greek word that Matthew used here is the word "*ethne*." Jesus told his disciples to make disciples, not only of *Jews*, but of *all* ethnicities. And I bring that up this morning because today marks the beginning of a 4-week series that we will be doing here at Redemption Hill entitled ***Pride, Prejudice, and the Gospel***, and I wanted you to see that it makes perfect sense for us to spend some time examining the issue of race relations in the church right after talking about the mission of the church.

A little over 40 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "***11:00 on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.***" If we're honest, we can still say the same thing today. *What do you think our segregated gatherings communicate to the rest of the world about our Jesus and our gospel?*

My heartfelt prayer this morning is that God would use Redemption Hill as one of the churches that serves as a "pacesetter" for others in this area of Racial Unity. And to help us on our way, we're going to begin by taking a look at Ephesians 2:8-22. Let's pray together.

### **Prayer.**

Lord please help us all to approach this very sensitive issue of race relations within the church with an open heart. Help us all to gain a deeper understanding of how the gospel fundamentally changes who we are, and how, then, we ought to see ourselves and others. Amen.

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### ***Ephesians 2:8-10***

*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 God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...*

*11 Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the "uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands--12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*

*13 But now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

*19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

### **Outline.**

This passage, perhaps better than any other in the Bible, helps us to see how God takes people of various ethnicities and brings them...

1. FROM a place outside of Christ, where their relationships are characterized by segregation and hostility.
2. TO the cross, where a fundamental change in who they are takes place
3. INTO new relationships "in Christ" which are now marked by peace and unity.

Let's follow Paul, verse by verse, as he leads us through 3 sections of thought:

- 🕒 "At one time" section in verses [11-12]
- 🕒 "But now in Christ Jesus" section in verses [13-18]
- 🕒 "So then you are" section in verses [19-22]

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### Sermon.

If you are a Christian, then Ephesians 2:8-10 teaches us that this is not primarily the result of your good choices. Rather, it is the result of God's special workmanship. And that workmanship is described as a work of *creation*. You did not simply adopt the religion of your parents one day. You are what you are because God took his grace and went to work. *He created a Christian out of the raw material of your sinful life!*

That word "created" in verse [10] is an extremely important word for us today. We'll see it again by the time we get to verse [15]. And I say that it's extremely important because Paul uses it to remind us that when God sent his Son Jesus into the world, he got back into the business of creating human beings. Jesus was the beginning of a "new humanity."

Everything that Paul says in this passage about the way that race relations are supposed to work within the church hinges upon the truth that, as Christians, we are members of a newly created humanity, in which **we are more defined by grace than we are by race.**

How do we *know* that everything Paul has to say about race relations in the church hinges upon this truth? We know this because of the word "*therefore*" at the beginning of verse [11]. After saying that we have been "created in Christ Jesus..." Paul says, "*Therefore, remember...*" That word *therefore* means that everything Paul is about to say in the next section of this passage arises from an implication of the truth that he gave us before the word *therefore*. This new creation in Christ has direct bearing upon race relations in the church, and with that word *therefore*, Paul launches into the "at one time" section of the passage.

### 🕒 "AT ONE TIME..." (who we were BC)

In this section, Paul begins to challenge the recently converted Gentiles to think of themselves in new ways, particularly when it comes to how their ethnicity impacts their relationships with their fellow Christians of Jewish descent. He tells them not to be concerned about the "name-calling" which once took place. Notice where he says that the Gentiles were, "*called the 'uncircumcision' by what is called the 'circumcision'...*" (v.11).

Can't we search our own mouths, our own hearts, our own past, and perhaps our own present for such name-calling? Do we not entertain jokes which belittle those of other races? Is such conduct becoming of Christians? Don't we distort the gospel when we live that way?

Paul goes on to further describe the Gentiles' past relationship to God and to Israel as one of segregation, hostility, and hopelessness with these words: "...remember that you *were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*" (v.12).

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### 🕒 “BUT NOW IN CHRIST JESUS...” (how Jesus changed everything at the cross)

Paul, however, shows them that all of this has changed with the words, “*But now in Christ Jesus...*” (v.13). These words indicate that there has been a complete change in their relationships, with both God and the Jews who are also now “in Christ Jesus.”

Still speaking to the Gentile Christians, Paul goes on to say that “you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (v.13). So, we see in these words “*by the blood of Christ*” the means by which God has changed the situation between Jews and Gentiles (and by inference, the means by which he has changed the situation between blacks and whites, asians and latinos, etc...). God has changed everything through *the Cross of Christ*.

Then, in verses [14-15], Paul tells us, with even more detail:

1. *What* Jesus did.
2. *Why* Jesus did it.

#### What Jesus Did.

Jesus established peace between those of different ethnicities by breaking down the wall of hostility which divided them, thus making them “one.” Let’s see all of this in the Scripture.

Paul says, “For [Jesus] himself is our peace...” (v.14). Notice, he does *not* say, “For [Jesus] himself *desperately hopes to be our peace one day.*” No. He states this truth in the present tense. Jesus IS our peace right now, whether we choose to acknowledge that truth or not.

Paul goes on to say that Jesus “has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...” (v.14). Notice the past tense of the verbs. He “*has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.*” The *oneness*, or unity, of the formerly separate races is a present reality in Christ through the gospel. ***Racial Unity is not first a thing to be achieved, but rather a thing to be believed!***

#### Why Jesus Did It.

Toward the end of verse [15], Paul tells us why Jesus did all of this. He did it “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two...” (v.15). There is that word “create” again which we saw back in verse [10]. Jesus created “one new man” out of the two, ethnically-different groups which came to the cross. This one new man is “in place of the two.” There is a replacement here, spiritually speaking. Segregation, on the basis of ethnicity, has no place in the church. “There is neither Jew no Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal.3:28).

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### **“SO THEN YOU ARE...” (who we are AD because of the gospel)**

After showing how the death of Christ is the only way to the Father for both Jews and Gentiles in verses [16-18], Paul moves into the “So then you are...” section of the passage.

*“So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone...” (v.19-20).*

“At one time,” you were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” because of your ethnicity; “But now in Christ Jesus,” all of that has changed. “So then...you are fellow citizens with the saints...” Once you were without “hope and without God in the world.” Now, you are “members of the household of God...”

### **Why don't we see more unity across racial lines in our churches?**

Why don't we see more of the kind of unity that we read about in verses [19-22]? I'll give you my opinion. In verse [20], we see that the household of God is *“built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone...”* Therein lies the key, I believe, to understanding our current level of segregation.

When you lay the foundation of a building, the cornerstone is the first stone to be set in its place. In one sense, you could say that the cornerstone determines everything else about the building. It determines the position of every other stone in the foundation as well as every other stone that rests on *top* of that foundation. The cornerstone, then, is the “main” stone in the building.

***Now, what if Jesus is not the main emphasis of a particular church?*** What if that church's message does not really bring people to the cross as much as it brings them to a set of moral ideals? What if it is more about “What *would* Jesus do?” (a *prescription* for morality) than it is about “What *did* Jesus do?” (a *description* of the gospel). What if the teachings of the “apostles and prophets,” as they are preserved for us in the Scriptures, are not really the foundation of what the people are taught there?

***If the church's message is not really about Jesus and his death on the cross, by which we are reconciled to both God and each other, around what will the people of the church rally?*** What will be the bond that holds together people as culturally different as blacks, whites, asians, and latinos?

***Without Christ and the Scriptures (particularly the gospel) being elevated to the place of first importance in a church's message and teaching, the only thing we have left to rally around is our cultural preferences.*** There, we will see little unity across racial lines. Only at the cross of Jesus Christ do we find the power to become and remain “one.” Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, who has made us all into “one new man” through the cross!