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God's New Society - Part 2

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott shows us that our relationship with God is made possible through the work of Christ in abolishing the law in order to create a new humanity.

Transcript

[Music] The moral law is still binding upon Christians as a standard of behaviour, but it's been abolished as a ground of salvation. You can't win your salvation by obedience to the law. That's one way in which the law separates men from God and men and women from each other because we can't obey the moral law.

[Music] Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott. There are few evangelicals who have ever influenced the global church in the 20th century as much as John Stott, and it was Betty Graham who called him the most respected clergyman in the world. Always remaining faithful to the word of God and unswayed by current trends, the person of Christ blazed from over a sermon he preached.

Whilst John Stott impacted the church across the world, his home church was always all souls laying in place in the heart of London's West End, and it's from 600 sermons he preached there that were marking his centenary with some of his most powerful messages.

[Music] In last week's message on Ephesians chapter 2, we saw how through Christ's death and resurrection, he has abolished our isolation and alienation from God and made us one with himself. This week John Stott continues that message by sharing us how we have been brought near to God through Christ.

You'll find it helpful to have Ephesians chapter 2 open in front of you. Paul elaborates the work of Christ in these verses, and I fear that in the shortage of time we can't look at all the details. As a matter of fact in verses 14 to 16, there are seven manverbs about what Christ has done, but in my own meditation for some weeks on this passage, and maybe I hope for your own thought, you will find it helpful to pick out of their seven manverbs,

the three principle ones.

Verse 14, sorry it's the beginning of verse 15, is the word abolish. Christ has abolished something called the law of commandments and ordinances. Next he has created something.

He's abolished something in order to create something else. And verse 16 in order that he might reconcile or ask both unto God. I want to suggest that the three verbs to abolish, to create and to reconcile are the key verbs of this paragraph, and will help us to understand what Christ has done.

He's abolished the law of commandments in order to create a single new humanity with the old division between Jew and Gentile done and finished, and he has reconciled this new humanity to God. An abolition, a creation and a reconciliation. That's what the peacemaker Christ has done.

Well let's look at it just in a little more detail. First he abolished the law, verses 14 and the beginning of 15. Now it's important for us to try to understand this because at first sight it's most surprising.

Not least because if you know the sermon on the mount you know that Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them." He said he hadn't come to abolish the law and Paul says he did abolish it. So there you are somebody says, "I told you the Bible was full of contradictions." Well it isn't. And this isn't a contradiction.

For one thing the Greek verb is different and doesn't mean the same thing, but another they're talking about different things. The primary reference of the apostle Paul here is to that part of the law which was ceremonial and ritual, circumcision, which was the main issue between the Jew and the Gentile. Gentiles uncircumcised, Jews circumcised, abolished Paul said.

You don't need to be circumcised today. You become a Christian by faith in Christ. You're baptized, you're part of the Christian community.

Circumcision is finished. That's part of the ceremonial law. The sacrifices were another.

They're all fulfilled in Christ. The dietary regulations, whether you can eat pork or not, whether you can eat bacon or not, you know. Now that it was a deep division between the Jews and the Gentiles, but it's all done away in Christ, the ceremonial regulation.

And that was one of the ways in which Christ by abolishing those ceremonial regulations as united Jew and Gentile. But there is another reference to the moral law that has been set aside, not as a standard of behavior. The moral law is still binding upon Christians as a standard of behavior, but it's been abolished as a ground of salvation.

You can't win your salvation by obedience to the law. That's one way in which the law separates man from God and men and women from each other because we can't obey the moral law. But Christ obeyed it, and he bore the consequences of our disobedience in his own body.

He took upon himself on the cross, the curse of the broken law, and thus has freed us from it. And whether we are Jews or Gentiles or black or white or yellow or pink or whatever our background may be, we come to God through Jesus Christ by faith. And the law has nothing to do with our coming to God.

It's been set aside as a way of salvation. And because it has been abolished in that sense along with the ceremonial Jews and Gentiles are united in a way that they were never united before. Acceptance with God is through faith in Christ.

That's the abolition of the law. Now the creation of one new humanity, so making peace. It's impossible, isn't it, to miss the way in which Paul moves from the negative to the positive from a certain abolition and demolition and destruction to a certain creation of something that is new.

He moves from the setting aside of the divisive law to the creating of a single new undivided humanity. The law you see had made a deep rift in humanity. Jews and Gentiles were alienated from one another.

They were at loggerheads and at enmity with one another. But now in place of those two humanities Christ has created a single new humanity. Potentially it was done at the cross when he set the law aside.

And actually and experimentally it happens when Jews and Gentiles are united by union with Christ through faith. Two men and women come to Jesus Christ by faith in Christ crucified. They kneel at the foot of the cross.

They say, "Lord Jesus, you died for me. I put my trust in you as my Savior. And immediately they are one." No matter what the diversity of their cultural background, Jesus Christ has created this one new humanity by his cross and reconciled both to God in one body ending the hostility.

This then was the achievement of Christ's cross. First he invalidated the law as a divisive instrument separating men from God and from one another. Second he created a single new humanity.

And third he reconciled this new humanity to God and ended the hostility for anybody who will come to Christ by faith. Now this does not mean that the whole human race is now united and reconciled, but only that those are all reconciled who are in Christ. And that's why Paul goes on immediately to say in verse 17 that he came and preached peace.

First he made peace at the cross, then he came and preached peace. To those who are far off in the distant Gentile world and to those who are near the Jews, the same message of peace proclaimed throughout the whole world by Christ. Christ made peace by the blood of his cross and he came and preached peace.

Now since the proclamation of peace must follow the achievement of the peace, the proclamation of the peace cannot refer to the public ministry of Jesus when he was on earth. It must refer to begin with to his post resurrection appearances. And did you know that the first work he spoke officially to the apostles after the resurrection was peace? Peace be with you, he said.

And again, peace be unto you. He had achieved peace, he proclaimed peace. And then he went on to proclaim it through the apostles and he's still proclaiming it today.

It is a wonderful thing to remember if you're a Christian witness that whenever you are preaching peace with God through Christ and peace with one another, it's really Jesus Christ who is making the proclamation through you. Now thirdly, we've looked so far at alienated humanity, second at the reconciling Christ. Now third, God's new society versus 19 to 21, what we have become.

So then, verse 19, I'm sorry I'm having to miss out some verses like 18, but we haven't time for all the data. So then, as a result of Christ's achievement on the cross and as a result of the announcement of peace through the apostles that you have received and welcomed and believed, you Gentiles are no longer what you used to be, no longer strangers or aliens or even soginers. On the contrary, your status has dramatically changed and your three things, your fellow citizens with the sense.

That is with, no doubt the sense there means the Jewish people of God. You Gentiles are fellow citizens with the sense, citizens of the same kingdom of God. In verse 12, we were told that they were alienated from the common wealth and it's the same Greek word, alienated from citizenship.

But now your fellow citizens with the sense, equal citizens. The kingdom of God is not explicitly mentioned here, but you can't be a citizen without there being a kingdom of which you are a citizen. So if we're fellow citizens, it must refer to the kingdom of God.

God rules over his people, his kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness and peace, and its existence is recognized by the righteousness and the peaceful standards which its citizens uphold. Citizens of the kingdom of God, God ruling over his people. But not only are we members of the kingdom of God, second we're members of the family of God.

Notice how I goes on in verse 19. No longer strangers, soginers, fellow citizens and members of a household. Now a household is a more intimate community to belong to than a kingdom.

A kingdom is one thing, a household or family is another. To know God is your king is one thing, to know God is your father is another. To be a citizen of one thing, to be a child is another.

And we are the children of God. Michael Bourne rightly has led all of us to refer to the congregation as the church family. The church is a family, it is the family of God.

So we're members of the kingdom of God, members of the family of God, and then we're members of the building of God, the temple of God, verses 20 to 22. The matter for changes again. The foundation of this building is the apostles and prophets.

The teaching of these uniquely inspired and authoritative men whom Jesus Christ had appointed to be the teachers of the church. Their teaching now enshrined in the New Testament is the foundation on which the church is built. All their Jesus Christ himself is the chief cornerstone, holding the building together, aligning it properly.

He is the cornerstone on which we build. The stones in the building are Christians, living stones, and whenever somebody is converted to Christ, another stone is added to the building. The nature of this building is a temple.

And of course the purpose of the building is to accommodate the living God himself. For this great building, not all souls church, but this great building, the universal community of Jesus, multiracial, multinational, multicultural, this amazing phenomenon is the dwelling place of God by the Spirit. God doesn't dwell in temples made with hands.

God's temple is people. God is here in our midst because he is always present where his people are. So to recapitulate, and then I must have a few moments to conclude.

What we've seen quite simply is that we were alienated. We have been reconciled and its Christ has brought us home. I believe it's hard to exaggerate the grandeur of this vision.

That God has created a new society, a new humanity whose major characteristic is not alienation as in secular society, but reconciliation. Not discord and enmity, but unity, equality, and peace. The God's people throughout the world together constitute a single kingdom over which he rules, a single family for which he cares, and a single building in which he dwells.

And that's the vision. When you turn from the ideal portrayed in scripture to the reality experienced in the church today, you want to weep until you've no more tears left. For even in the Christian church there is alienation and disunity and discord.

And Christians erect new barriers in place of the barrier that Christ destroyed. They erect a calber. They erect the barriers of racism, nationalism, tribalism, or a divisive structure of class or caste, or even a clericalism that sunders clergy from laity in the church.

And all these barriers that we erect in the only community in which there should be none are an offense to Christ and an offense to the world. They are an offense to Christ. How dare we build barriers of partition in the one and only human community in which Christ has destroyed them? Do we realize that when we're doing it, we're setting ourselves against Christ and even undoing his work? And it's not only an offense against Christ, it's an offense against the world, because these barriers prevent the world from believing in Jesus.

Jesus intends his people to be a sign to the old humanity of the new humanity that he has created. Jesus means his people to exhibit to the world what true community looks like. The tragedy is that the church that is intended to be a stepping stone to faith becomes a stumbling block to faith.

And brethren, we need to get these failures of the church on our conscience. We need to feel the offense to Christ and to the world that these failures are. We need to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone them.

And we need to determine to do something about it. So we bring it right home. What are the barriers in our own fellowship tonight? Will you answer that question in your own heart? Is there prejudice in somebody's heart? Because of people of a different color or culture, is there personal animosity towards somebody because we're jealous of them or threatened by them or disagree with them? Is there some quarrel in the Christian community, some breach of fellowship that we've never put right? Then I said to you, brethren, it is sheer hypocrisy to study a passage of Scripture like this to assent to its teaching, to rejoice in the vision that it gives of the church as God's new society, and to do nothing to turn the ideal into a reality that rather acquiesce in its non-reality.

And I wonder if there is anything more urgent in the world today than that the church of Jesus Christ should be seen to be what it is. God's new humanity, a family of love, a model of human community, and the evident dwelling place of God by His Spirit. That is prayer.

We spend a moment of confession. If we are guilty of any breach in the fellowship, if we have erected any barrier between ourselves and a brother or sister in the church family, let's confess it now. And let's resolve by the grace of God even tonight to put it right, with a word of apology, a letter of apology to get reconciled to one another.

Let's make confession and make our own determination before God. Our Heavenly Father, we thank You that the Lord Jesus is the great peace maker. We have turned our alienation into reconciliation and our enmity into peace.

We thank You for Your Kingdom, Your family, and Your temple in which You dwell. This community, this new humanity, this new society, help us to make it a reality, even here in London that others may see and it drawn in. The glory of Your great and reconciling

name.

You've been listening to the conclusion of a message by John Stott on Ephesians chapter 2. This was one of a series of thirteen sermons that John gave on the letter to the Ephesians, and you can listen to the rest by visiting our website. John wrote over fifty books in his lifetime, eight of which form part of the highly acclaimed, The Bible Speaks Today commentary series, including one on the book of Ephesians. Details of all his books and how to purchase them can be found at premier.org.uk/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world.

Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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