

FGBC: Become who you are: Access to the King

Ephesians 2:11-22

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Please grab your Bible. We are in Ephesians 2 today. That's page 827 if you are looking in the pew Bible. And I want to encourage you to keep your Bible open.

As we get started I want to talk about the difference between active and passive listening. Active listening is something that happens brilliantly on first dates. For some of us this has been a while. But go back there. Imagine you just got asked out by an incredibly beautiful person. You've been bumping into them for a while but they just invited you out for a coffee. And you are sitting across the table and they are telling you a bit about themselves. And you want them to know you are interested.

What do you do? You lean in. You smile. You put your phone down.

Active listening takes work, but it is something we can pull off when love is on the line. Passive listening is different – it's easy. This is something you do when you are watching TV. So when I've got time to kill I pop open a bag of salt and vinegar chips and my hand just starts commuting up and down all on its own. My jaw chomps and my eyes bug out of an expressionless face. The next day sometimes I can't even remember what I watched but I have to log an extra hour on the treadmill. That's passive listening.

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So, we are just about to dig into God's word. Ask yourself is what I'm about to receive more like I'm sitting across the table from someone incredible who loves me and has been chasing me, desiring relationship; someone who is interested in sharing themselves with me. Or is it more like I'm sitting down to something mindless where I can just put my brain on auto pilot?

Here is my conviction, Jesus loves you and wants to speak into your life today for your good – let Him do it. So follow along in the text, make eye contact. Lean forward. If something resonates with your heart you can pretend you have a bit more pigment in your skin and say "amen." That will be hard for us pasty-whites. Take notes. Tweet sentences that stand out. Don't consume God's word like TV, consume it like it was meant to be received. Be an active listener.

Okay, that was preamble – you got that for free. On to scripture. If you are new with us we are in the middle of a book study through Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. And today we are in Ephesians 2 starting in verse 11. And our text starts out talking about circumcision so you know this is every pastor's favorite topic.

It's a little like being a middle school teacher and knowing that sex-ed class is coming and you get to explain all sorts of awesome to eager minds. This is going to be good.

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But explaining circumcision isn't Paul's point – so if you don't know what that is ask your mom – Paul's talking about something worse. The question this passage raises is about one of the biggest black spots humanity has; it gets dark. But there is light at the end of the tunnel.

So the problem this text deals with is division caused by racism. Racism is nasty. Now from a global perspective Canada is one of the most inclusive countries in the world. We pride ourselves in being a place where people from all over can make a home for themselves and be accepted. We all know Canada isn't perfect, but in general, when it comes to racism we are satisfied with our image of progressive tolerance. The consensus is that Canada is a great place for minority groups.

But as I was studying for this message I came across a string of articles in Maclean's Magazine which sought to expose some of the darker corners of Canadian culture by comparing the First Nations people of Canada with the African Americans of the States.

So we have all heard stories of police brutality in the States. The predominantly white police force brings its cultural bias to work, and the officers end up using more force with blacks than whites. So there was a viral video on Youtube a couple months back showing an officer shooting a unarmed black man to death in his car with his wife sitting beside him and his pre-schooler in the back seat. That's not okay. And we are all happy that kind of stuff doesn't happen in Canada.

But then the article started comparing statistics. And of the 14 categories examined Aboriginal Canadians were worse off than African-Americans. So our First Nations have higher unemployment rates than African-Americans, lower wages, higher percentage of incarcerations when compared to the national average, lower life expectancy, and Higher school dropout rates. And all these statistics point to a systemic problem – racism is worse in Canada than the States.

Now I'm not calling you a racist. But I will confess that it is easy as a pasty white guy to sit in my high tower and believe the stereotypes about how our Aboriginal brothers and sisters are the reason for their own problems.

So a school teacher in Winnipeg was recently fired after posting a comment on Facebook. Brad Badiuk wrote:

“Oh – how long are aboriginal people going to use what happened as a crutch to suck more money out of Canadians? They have contributed NOTHING to the development of Canada. Just standing with their hand out. Get to work, tear the treaties and shut the – up already. Why am I on the hook for their cultural support?”

Now maybe you've never agreed with sentiment like this. But if you are as pasty white as I am – so white that when people talk about white privilege you don't really believe it is a thing – then chances are you have.

But friends, a stereotype by definition isn't true. It's built on prejudice. This doesn't mean there is no problem – it's obvious we have a problem. It just means pointing the finger at people who aren't us isn't going to fix it.

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Here's the reason I bring this up. In our text today Paul is speaking to a group of Christians who knew racism, but then experienced something else.

Look with me at verse 11. This is what things were like before:

[Read Ephesians 2:11-12]

So there was extreme alienation between Gentiles and Jews. And it was multifaceted. The Jews had a different religion than the Gentiles did. They believed in one God, and the Christians also knew His Son. But it was also cultural. Jews had all sorts of rules that separated them from everyone else. They ate different food and wore different clothing and celebrated different holy days. And all this was intentionally put in place to show everyone else that they were God's special people. And on top of all this there was a racial divide. The Jews had been sticking to themselves since Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So by the time of Paul there had been 2000 years pure blood line. So the Jews didn't think they were racists, they just knew they were better than everyone else. Imagine trying to bust into that.

But then look down at the end of the passage. Let's pick it up in verse 19.

[Read Ephesians 2:19-22]

Everything is different. This is "saved" language. This is what happens when Jesus invades brokenness. He's all about taking the wrecked world we have all been wallowing in and making it beautiful. So let me ask you, could you use a little of that? Is there brokenness in you that threatens to tear you apart? Maybe it's relational or financial or spiritual or emotional. But it's bigger than you can handle. Could you benefit from the invasion of a power big enough to obliterate 2000 years of racism? Nothing in your life is worse than that.

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Here's what I want us to see; what has happened between these two sets of verses isn't a minor perspective tweak. It isn't about implementing 7 keys to enable self-improvement. These verses are describing a paradigm shift where nothing is like it used to be.

So what caused this change? What is big enough to tear down walls this high? What is big enough to give hope to your situation?... Paul gives it to us in the verses between – verses 13 to 18. These are powerful verses.

You see, when the reality of God's kingdom comes in contact with the world we live in a collision occurs. God attacks and deconstructs the worldviews we have built our lives around and this creates a crisis of faith. We have to decide what we are going to do with His revelation. Are we going to keep living the way we were, or are we going to allow His word to change us?

Let me unpack one of these worldviews that gets preached everywhere. So there is no debate that the world is a mess. On the off days, when we aren't running into questions of racism and residential schools, kids are dying in bus accidents and others are getting run over by angry people driving rented vans. Everyone agrees that the world is broken and Canada is right there in the middle of it.

But what we don't agree on is the solution. So the big solution the world proposes when brokenness flies in its face is that we need more education and more technology. This is humanism's answer. People are the answer to the world's problems.

And humanism has been talking like this since the renaissance, but actually it is a lot older than that. Tell me if you recognize this story: humanism has always been about working together to build a tower high enough that we won't need God anymore. If you don't know that story it's Genesis 11 – that's pretty close to the beginning. So the idea is if we can work together to invent cool enough stuff and teach enough kids to read then we won't need God or religion any more. And this gets preached every day.

So if you followed the news this last week you probably noticed a major difference in the way the Humboldt bus tragedy and the van attack in Toronto were handled.

Humboldt is a community with a lot of Jesus lovers in it, and the hockey team represented this. And so the chaplain of the team got the opportunity to speak at the memorial. And I listened to his message. And it was powerful. He spoke about choosing to trust in a God who walks with us through the brokenness we experience even when we don't know why terrible things happen. The message was there is hope beyond tragedy if you place your trust in Jesus.

But in Toronto the message was different. The voice of hope rising from the ashes is #Torontostrong. The cry is: Toronto always has Toronto's back. We are going to stand together. We are going to go-fund-me this problem away. We will educate our kids about hate and together we will rise above. This is humanism's answer to tragedy.

Now that is sweet and pretty, but here's the question that humanism needs to answer. With all the great advancements in technology since the renaissance – and pretty much everything good has happened since then – education, medication, transportation – everything has improved. But with all that improvement has humanity been able to climb above its own depravity?

With all this advancement have we been able to avoid things like world wars? Has that happened? Is genocide no longer a thing? Has the gap between the rich and the poor been obliterated? Or rather has depravity just increased? Is suicide and mental illness on the rise? Has internet bullying chased kids home? Are more and more people being consumed by eating disorders and substance abuse? Ask yourself those questions.

You see we've had more advancement than anyone imagined possible, but the only thing we haven't accomplished is getting better. People are still broken. And it is into this brokenness that God speaks. Look at verse 13.

[Read Ephesians 2:13]

Paul says something incredible has happened in Ephesus. Jews and Gentiles - people who had nothing in common – people who hated each other for all sorts of irrational and unreconcilable reasons – have been brought together by the blood of Jesus.

God's answer is that the only thing powerful enough to break the strength of humanities curse is the death of God. And so God died. Jesus died by design to become the peace of humanity.

Look at verse 14

[Read Ephesians 2:14-17]

In His death God destroyed the barriers between the Jew and God and between the Gentile and God. And because the infinite divide between people and God has been reconciled the measurable divides between people have been overcome as well.

Paul says the Christian reality is that something so big has happened that it makes every other distinction about ourselves small. Because Jesus' flesh was torn for us on the cross every other distinction between us has been put to death. Peace between us and God, and between us is the reality for those who are in Jesus. Friends, if you have put your faith in Jesus you aren't the same as you were. We aren't Jews and Gentiles anymore, we aren't preps and skaters. We aren't even aboriginals or whites or any other division. We are a new humanity.

So are you living this out? Are you intentionally, proactively speaking and bringing peace?... There is so much more that could be said, but I want to get to verse 18 which is the real meat today.

[Read Ephesians 2:18]

So the answer to the world's problems isn't humanity getting better and better. Paul says the answer to our brokenness is finding a way to get access to God. You don't need yourself with a degree and a new TV, you are more broken than that. You need God!

But how do we get Him? How do we get God? This is the age-old question. How do we get on God's side?

The image is of a glorious king in ancient times. And you want to go see him. But if you go in the wrong way you are going to die. So you want to know how do I get access to this king. And the answer is you have to do it the way the king says.

So think King Solomon. If you went to him you had to bring gold and spices. Or if you've ever read Esther this is the plot. The rule of the land was that if you entered the king's court without an invitation he could have you killed. But Esther needed the king's attention so she made herself as beautiful as she possibly could because she knew the king had a thing for ladies. And it worked.

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This makes sense to us, so we try it with God. When I started pursuing Jesus at 19 I wanted to be a real Christian like some of the guys I had just met. So I poured my energy into behaviour modification – I worked to stop looking at porn. I laboured to do devotions. And I spent all my money studying theology. My thought was now that I'm following Jesus I need to really follow Him to capture His love.

And I thought this way because I was constantly measuring myself against other people. I would meet someone who was getting up at 5 to pray for an hour and I thought man God must really love Him. And so I would start doing the same. It was behaviour modification.

So what is God's weakness? What do we need to do to get access to Him? Does He want gifts? Do we have to bring money? Do we have to obey the rules? Do we need to read the Bible and go to church? Do you need to get baptized to get God?

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Paul says "This isn't the way it is with God." He's got no weakness for good behaviour. If you get baptized you don't get some magic chips that you can cash in with God. "I gave you what you want God, now you give me what I want. Help me get the job I need. Help me with my broken relationship. Help me with my addiction."

Last week Paul said "it is by grace you have been saved, not by works, so that no one can boast." So access to God isn't about anything we can do. This goes for how we get saved and it goes for how we live as saved people. It is always about what God has done for us.

And so Paul says God the Father of everything has made the way for all people – Jews and Gentiles and every other division – to come to Him. And it is through Him – through Jesus – by the Spirit that this happens.

This means it isn't our performance that gets us God's love. It is God's love that gets us God's love and this gives us incredible freedom.

In Galatians Paul says:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

So if you are following Jesus today don't go back to your old ways of trying to earn things. Don't be burdened trying to be good. You are free.

But this doesn't mean free to make yourself god in our life. That was the bondage you got saved out of – don't go back to that. Instead you are free to respond in love to God.

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So you are sitting across the table from that incredible person who has been paying attention to you and wooing you. And when you see how much they love you, you fall in love.

And let me tell you people do crazy things when they are in love. When I was chasing Nikki I used to show up at her house in the winter and shovel her driveway after getting off a 12 hour nightshift at Husky. I worked all night but somehow when 6am showed up I had tones of energy and I just went skipping over to her house to shovel the driveway. Where does energy like that come from?

On top of this I was writing poetry and letters and buying flowers. (I did so much of that back then that I figure I don't have to do it anymore.) Ummmm... no – got to repent about that. Here's the point – nobody told me I had to do these things to earn Nikki's love. I had her love and it made me do crazy things!

And this is what God wants for us and from us. He doesn't want your duty. He doesn't want your money. He wants your love. He wants you to see how much He loves you and be won over by it.

And it was to this end that He did verse 18. Through Jesus God granted us access to the Father. This sums up the whole Bible. It's all about how to get access to God.

So it started in the garden with Adam and Eve. Everything was perfect. They were hanging out with God naked and unashamed. And then they ruined it. They choose to be god in their own life even though they made pathetic, worthless little gods. And in the process their relationship with the real God got broken.

And so the question began: how are we going to get back to God? And along comes Abraham and God tells Him, "I promise that I'm going to use you and your family to make it possible for all the people of the world to come back to Me. And the guarantee of this promise is that I'm on the hook for it not you. You are going to let Me down, but I'm still going to make this happen."

And so Abraham's family, called Israel, started following God. But they were a bunch of doubting mess-ups who constantly wandered into slavery and the desert because of it. And so God gave them the Law so they would know how to live with Him. But they just couldn't make themselves follow it even though every time they didn't they got burnt.

And finally God brought them into the Promised Land anyway. And here they built a temple, and the hope was now we are finally going to be able to be with God. But they messed that up too. But the prophets kept saying "God is going to make a way. He's going to fix this." And the people kept messing up. And so Babylon happened and then 400 years of silence from God. The people thought God had forsaken them. But even when we screw up He is faithful.

And that's when Jesus entered the picture. And He died on the cross and rose from the dead. And in that moment the veil in the temple that separated God from people got torn. But it got torn from the top to the bottom. People weren't breaking in, God was breaking out.

It turns out God hadn't been waiting for us to finally climb high enough, He knew the only way access to Him would be good news for us is if we were clothed in His righteousness and filled with His Spirit. So that's what He did in Jesus. That's verse 18!

And so because of His great love for us, while we were still being sinners, God died for us like He promised Abraham He would

That is an incredible love. This is love big enough to overcome any brokenness you are facing right now. This is love is deep enough to deal with the worst self-worth issues. This is love is high enough to overcome any prejudice. It's even big enough to destroy racism and make one new humanity out of two groups of people who had spent two thousand years hating each other.

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So the question is what are you going to do in light of this love? God loves you. You don't deserve it, you haven't earned it. But God loves you. And He loves you no matter what you do. So what are you going to do?

Jesus wants to know if you are going to love Him back. But His question isn't a needy one. You need Him, He doesn't need you. But He wants you. He wants you to see how much He loves you, and He wants you to love Him back.