

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have a confession to make before all of you this morning. I absolutely love the Olympics. Always have...always will. And here's why I do. When I was younger, it was just the sheer excitement of it all, being fascinated by all these different sports. Today, what I love is amazing displays of athleticism from these athletes, some of their compelling stories, how many of are just average Joe's like you and me.

Now, I'm guessing there's a few more of you out there who like the Olympics as well. But I hope something that isn't lost with you is how for two weeks, as people from countries throughout the world join for the Olympics, there's a relative peace. Athletes from all over the world, from countries who may be at odds with each other, but not here, not for this time. No, it's a coming together, a unity.

In the Apostle Paul's time, a unity, unfortunately, was not something that was all that common, even amongst the Christians. You know, even though this Christian church still young and growing, would have greatly benefitted from a unified front, especially with the intense persecution the early Christians faced from Jesus' Jewish enemies and the Roman government, these Christians were letting the small things get in the way. Most notably, race and ethnicity.

It was Jews vs. Gentiles. The so-called children of the promise vs. the heathens, the outsiders. And, oh, how the Jews just could not let it go, the fact that even though the Gentiles weren't God's original chosen people, even though the Savior hadn't been born from their line, Jesus had still died for their sins, too, so they too were to be forgiven.

But truth be told, they were no different. No matter what their race, what their ethnicity, what their walk of life, they were all the same. They were, as Paul writes earlier, before our verses this morning, dead in transgressions and sins. But all of them, Jews and Gentiles alike, saved by grace, made alive by Christ.

And finally, brought together, united through the blood of Jesus. Yes, in past years, there had been a barrier separating the Jews and Gentiles. It was called the law. Not that the Gentiles weren't outside of the law and didn't have to live by it or answer to it, especially if they failed to keep it. The law of God we are most familiar with, the moral law, what's binding on every conscience for every person, that is, the Ten Commandments, that was for both Jew and Gentile.

But there were specific laws God gave the Jews, or the Israelites, which governed their day to day lives, civil laws, as well as laws for their worship practices, ceremonial laws. Those laws were meant to serve as a hedge, to keep the Israelites, God's chosen people, separate from the rest of the people to keep their line pure for the promised Messiah. And it was a huge source of contention and hostility between the Jews and everyone else. Ok, in that way, the Gentiles were once far away, far away from the covenant of the promised Savior, excluded from citizenship in Israel

But, once that Messiah, once Jesus came, there was no more need for those hedge laws. Jesus brought peace. Jesus broke down that barrier between Jews and Gentiles because he abolished those civil and

ceremonial laws by fulfilling them perfectly. He put their hostility to death by his cross, the pinnacle of his preaching of peace.

So the argument could no longer be Jew vs. Gentile. No, it was only sinners saved by the blood of the Lamb. Not two different groups of people, but one body of believers, unified under Christ. People at peace, not just with each other, but even better, people at peace with God.

Now, I know Paul is primarily talking about the Jews and the Gentiles in these verses, but can you see the parallels with your life here? Once separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel (that is, the spiritual Israel, heaven), foreigners and aliens to that place. In fact, far away from Jesus, separated by a wall of hostility. All of those, describe you and me, at one time.

We were excluded from heavenly membership, and you know why, don't you? Because God says, "Be holy, be perfect, because I the LORD your God am holy." And we couldn't do it. God's perfect and righteous requirement to become a citizen of heaven, we couldn't meet it. We actually weren't even close. We were as far away from Jesus as you could possibly get, like from here to the southern tip of the Cape of Good Hope, except even further, again, because he's perfect, and we're not.

And even worse than being far away from him, was this massive barrier sitting between us and God, the only thing keeping us from fulfilling God's demands for a holy and perfect life, sin. Exactly what the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said, "Your iniquities (another word for sin) have separated you from your God."

And that was a barrier of hostility, where we hated God, where we were his enemies, with no inkling in of trying to do anything on our own to break down that wall that had soured our relationship with our God almost beyond repair.

Combine that all together, our inability to be perfect, far away from Christ and his perfection, with the barrier of sin and our hostility towards God keeping us from him, and you get our sad, SCARY situation. One without Christ, one without hope, one looking like we were headed toward hell.

On our own, we strayed, we were getting further and further away from the only good thing in our life, from Jesus, our Lord and Savior. But it was that precious gift of God's grace that broke through that barrier of sin, which reconciled us back with God, unified us with him again.

Can you see how Paul describes that gift of grace in our verses? Well, with phrases like these: "You who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ...he is our peace...he destroyed the barrier ...to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility...he came and preached peace."

So many gems in just those few verses, telling you again and again how you have been saved. First of all, you were saved not because of yourself or because of anything you've done. Right? On our own, we were only drifting away from God. So he BROUGHT us back...God brought us to him with the blood of Christ.

You know, there's a passage I just love, and I always use to explain how God brought us to him through Jesus. It's, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

That's what these verses of Paul here are all getting at. We were divided from God, all our fault, because we sin. But he brought us to him. He made Jesus, who had no sin, who was perfect, who lived the sinless life, God made him to be sin for us. Do you understand what that's saying? There was peace between Jesus and God because Jesus did fulfill the righteous requirements of God. But the same couldn't be said about us and God, so Jesus became our peace.

He became sin for us. He took our sins on the cross, and by his death, exchanged his perfection, his righteousness, being right with God, his peace. All that, through the cross, became ours.

That passage I just shared with you, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God," that is a passage of reconciliation. You know what reconciliation is, don't you? It's a coming back together, it's two opposing sides being brought back together. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection brought about that reconciliation between us and God. Jesus broke down the barrier of sin, that barrier of our hostility against God because he took all that on himself and died for it, and in his death, defeated it.

And now we have reconciliation. Now we have peace. That's what Jesus preached about throughout his earthly ministry, and that's what the entire Bible centers on, peace between us and God because Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose. The message of reconciliation between us and God, the gift of his grace, his underserved love, which unifies us with him, where we are no longer foreigners and aliens to God's heavenly kingdom, but even now, still being on this earth, we are citizens of heaven, and even better, we are God's dearly loved children.

All that, in spite of the wedges we still try to place between us and God. Because, believe me, we still try to, on a daily basis. You and I still try to reconstruct that barrier of sin between us and God every time we say something that isn't God-pleasing, when we disobey one of the Ten Commandments, and even our own thoughts, everyday they condemn us to hell. But God's gift of grace continually takes out those wedges, because of what Jesus did, so everyday, you and I have peace in our relationship with God.

And what's awesome about being unified with God, having peace with him, that means we are also unified with each other. In fact, that peace from God unifies us with all believers throughout the ages, all of us, members of God's household.

God's house, built on a solid foundation, the apostles and the prophets. Do you know what Paul means by those words? Well, he's not saying that our church, our beliefs are built on the physical apostles and prophets, like, hey, we should be worshipping and praying to Peter, Paul, Moses, and Elijah, just to name a few.

But rather, the foundation of our faith, that's what these men were all about, who they spoke about and wrote about, the cornerstone, Jesus. Everything comes back to Jesus. Jesus and his saving work which the apostles and prophets wrote about, which they pointed to, that is the foundation of the Church, of the body of believers. That is the basis of our unity with God and our unity with the other members of God's household.

The Olympics, a time for countries to forget their differences, to come together for a couple of weeks for some peaceful games. You know, in those Olympics, it's all about the race, it's all about getting the gold. In our lives, we are all in a race, to reach the end, to get the greatest reward there is, the crown of life. And you're not running alone. We have each other, our team of fellow believers spurring each other on, giving each other help and encouragement along the way.

And you and I, even better, we have God. Because of his gift of grace, we are united with him. And because we are reconciled with God, we have already won the race. The wall of sin has already been destroyed by Jesus. We are at peace with God. And because we are reconciled with God here on earth, we will be at peace with him in heaven forever, the greatest price there is, a gift of God's grace. Amen.