

The scarcest resource

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Date: 12 August 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder if you know what the rarest resource in the world is. What is the rarest resource in the world? And despite the price of how much it costs to fill up your car, it's not petrol, as you might think.

In fact, it's something that humans have always been on the hunt for, ever since the world began. And it's not gold or oil or plutonium. You know what the rarest resource in the world actually is?

It's peace. Peace. Peace is actually, if you think about it, the rarest, most hard-to-come-by resource that humans have always tried to find but never had, never been able really to grasp and hold down, much as we've tried.

From the ancient times and the Romans, the Romans were the first real attempt to build a kingdom of peace. They called it the Pax Romana, the Roman peace. Or the great colonial empires.

As well. Despite their methods, which are questionable, their objective was to bring world peace, a new world order, global peace.

[1 : 1 0] And even in our own century, or at least last century, the whole communist experiment, you know, with Russia and the Cold War. And the communists genuinely were trying to build a utopia of peace and equality where no one was in need.

These were all, at least they started out as legitimate attempts at peace. And yet, did any of them actually achieve peace? Well, no.

If you know your history, if anything, they just left the world in more conflict than it was before. The truth is, throughout our history, every significant attempt at finding peace has been a dismal failure.

We just can't seem to get it right as a species, as a human race. And why is that? Why are we incapable of just getting along with each other? And history is just a testimony of our failure to get along.

And not just on a political level, but on a personal level too. I bet right now, there is a relationship in your life that you're in some kind of conflict with.

[2 : 1 4] Am I right? And if there's not right now, there will be in the next month, and there probably has been in the past month. We just really struggle to get along. And that is why this passage that we're looking at in Ephesians this morning is so important.

Because in it, what we discover, if we understand what it's saying, is we discover firstly why peace is so hard to find. This passage actually teaches us the problem.

Why it's so difficult to be at peace with each other. But we also learn, even more importantly, what is the key to actually finding peace in our world and in our lives.

And so yes, for thousands of years, we've been looking for peace. And all that time, it's been right under our nose in Ephesians 2. And so that's what we're going to look at this morning. But of course, to understand what this passage means for us, we first need to do the work of understanding what it meant for the original readers.

Why Paul writes what he does here, what the context is, and where it fits into what he's saying in his whole letter of Ephesians. Now we've already seen, if you were with us last week, that this passage that we're reading, which is 2:11-22, is in a section where Paul is explaining to the Ephesian Christians just how different they are from what they were before.

[3 : 33] Remember that last week? We started that, and he gave this before and after picture of the Ephesians. He's trying to emphasize to them that they're completely different people now that they've come to Christ and become Christians.

And what you'll find is, if you look at this morning's passage, it's actually very similar in what it's saying in its structure to last week's passage. Here in the first bit of the passage, verse 11-12, is about what the Ephesians were before, same as how last week's passage started.

And then in verse 13-18, you've got the turning point, but now, and he explains what's changed. And then from verse 19 on, you've got the new situation, what the Ephesians have now become.

So if you were here last week, and if you were in growth groups, do you see how similar this passage is to the one we studied last week? Very similar. Almost exactly the same structure. Is Paul just repeating himself?

Is he getting a bit old and fuddy-duddy, and he forgot that he wrote that last passage? Well, no. Because if you study them closely, you'll realize there is one major difference between last week's passage, 2:1-10, and this week's passage, 2:11-22.

[4 : 44] Very similar, but there's one major difference. And that is this. The last passage described the change in the Ephesians' status since becoming Christians in relation to God and the spiritual world, whereas this passage describes their change of status in relation to other people and the everyday physical world.

So very similar, but also very different in its message. So you can look at it this way. Last week's passage spoke about the change in a Christian's vertical relationships, right?

Well, this passage speaks about their horizontal relationships with other people and how those, the horizontal relationships in a Christian's life, also fundamentally change when you come to Christ, which, again, is what this whole letter of the Ephesians is about.

How does your life fundamentally change your identity and your purpose and what you're doing in this world? How does it change? And what aspects of your life change in what ways? When you become a Christian, we'll hear this passage.

It's about how your relationships change. And so how exactly did those change for the Ephesians, the Ephesian Christians? Well, let's see in our Bibles. I want you to look in your Bible.

[5 : 58] And if you don't have one, just take one of the Pew Bibles, find Ephesians 2 and look at verse 11. We're going to look at how the Ephesians relationships fundamentally changed when they became Christians.

Verse 11. So he starts by saying what they were. He says, Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision.

Now, let's just pause there because this is a cultural thing which often we're not exposed to. Circumcision was a very important religious sign for the Jews that basically emphasized their Jewishness.

It marked them out as the rest of the world as being Jewish. And it's what they used to distinguish themselves from non-Jews called the Gentiles. And those two groups of people, by the way, really didn't like each other.

And we've got to understand just, which we don't really today, understand just how much animosity those two groups of people in the ancient world had for each other, the Jews and the Gentiles.

[7 : 03] Particularly how much the Jews despised non-Jews, despised the Gentiles, and they would do anything to avoid them. Maybe this will give you an idea. Apparently, under Jewish law, it wasn't even permitted for a Jew to help a Gentile woman in need, especially if she was in labor, because that would be, I quote, assisting to bring another Gentile into the world.

And Jews weren't allowed to have any part in that. And Jews basically believed that all Gentiles were good for, the reason that they were put on earth is just to be fuel for the fire of hell.

That was what a Jewish child would be taught about Gentiles. And so you can begin to understand why Jews and Gentiles didn't, you know, join each other for a bri on the weekend. But we've got to ask the question, why?

To understand what Paul's saying here, we've got to first ask ourselves, why did the Jews hate the Gentiles so much? And the reason is because they were convinced God liked them more than the Gentiles, that God favoured them, that there was something about them that God favoured, that he didn't for the Gentiles, and that kind of built up their hatred towards the Gentiles, who they assumed God didn't like as much.

And you can almost understand why they thought that. After all, it was to the Jews that God had chosen to reveal himself in history, and not the Gentiles. It was to the Jews that God had given a special way to approach him through the temple and the sacrificial system that he hadn't given to the rest of the world.

[8 : 38] And that's why Paul writes here, verse 12, to these Gentile Christians. He writes, you were, at one time, separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

The Jews had those privileges in the Old Testament times, and it's because they had those privileges that they couldn't help thinking that they must have been better than the Gentiles, that God chose them over the Gentiles because they had something about them which was better.

And of course, there's no better fuel for hatred than self-righteousness is there. It's interesting, isn't it, how the most hateful groups of people in the world throughout history are those who think that they have somehow earned God's favor over and above another group.

Have you noticed that? Think of Muslim extremism, for example. Or indeed, the so-called Christians during the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition and the burnings at the stake in England.

Some of the most ruthless times in history were actually fueled by this religious self-righteousness, a belief that one group, that we have favor with God, that the other group doesn't have, so that gives us the right then to abuse them and to be violent towards them.

[9 : 58] And that's just like the Jews' hatred for the Gentile was. But now, the point that Paul's actually trying to make to the Ephesians, the big point of this passage, is that that's all changed.

That animosity, that hostility, that difference between the two groups has now changed since Jesus has come. Look at verse 13. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

And so he's saying that the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles has now fundamentally changed since Jesus came to earth.

The Jesus event, the life and the work of Jesus on earth completely changed, obviously, a lot of things in the present time and in eternity.

But it also changed this relationship between these two groups of people. Why? How and why did Jesus coming to earth fundamentally change the relationship between these people?

[11 : 06] We'll look at verse 14 and 15 because Paul goes on to explain why. He says, And so that's how Jesus changed the situation between Jews and Gentiles.

By setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. But what on earth does that mean now? What does setting aside in his flesh the law mean?

Well, it means, and we've got to understand this because it's central to understanding not just this passage, but understanding the whole Bible. It means that when Jesus died on the cross and paid for the sins of those who trust him, what happened at that moment was that the law, God's law, that he gave to the world, good as that law was to show us the difference between right and wrong.

But when Jesus died, that law lost its ability to keep people away from God by condemning them. Because that's what it did. It was the gatekeeper between sinners and the holiness of God.

And the moment Jesus died, Paul is telling us here, the law lost its ability to keep people away from God. Why? Because on the cross, Jesus took all of that condemnation that the law points at people.

[12 : 44] He took it on himself. If you're a believer in Christ, Jesus has already taken the punishment for all the times that you've already broken God's law and all the times that you're still going to.

And so being right with God is no longer about keeping the law. But as we learned last week, it's through grace alone, in faith, in what Jesus did on our behalf.

So think of it like this. You know there's access cards that you get for like an office building. If you go to work in a fancy office, you've probably got an access card, right?

That you swipe at the entrance to give you access and it keeps out people who aren't supposed to be there. You understand what I mean? Access cards, right? Work with me on this one. Okay. So you need a card to get access, to get past that angry-looking security guard who always seems to be sitting there with his arms folded looking at everyone who comes in.

I once remember, I once worked in an office where it had a turnstile system at the front and you had an access card and I forgot my card at home that morning.

[13 : 53] It was a 50-minute commute to work so I wasn't going to turn around and go back and get it. So I just kind of smiled and waved at the security guard going, you know, I'm sure he knows me and he just sat there looking at me and I kind of said, can I?

And he just went. He said, where's your access card? So I thought he remembered me from years and years of walking past him in the morning and obviously he didn't. And so I had to actually get on my phone and phone a colleague to come from downstairs and swipe me in.

And the moment that happened, the moment that God saw that I knew this person, he let me through. So the colleague's access worked for me as well because of the relationship that I had with that person.

Even though I didn't have my own access card. Do you see how this is actually an illustration for the gospel and what Jesus did for us? We can't get access to God by our own merits.

As Gentiles, we were previously barred access to God and the security guard of God's law made sure that we couldn't get in.

[14 : 58] But then Jesus, the friend of sinners, came down from God and swiped us in so we could get access through our relationship with him even though we didn't have an access card.

We could get access. Not because we had an access card but because he kept the law for us. So the access card is keeping the law. We didn't have that access.

Jesus did. He kept the law for us so we could get in because of his access card basically. And so a human's access to God now is no longer through keeping laws.

And this is something that all major world religions still have to realize because to them they've all got their set of laws. set of rules that you've got to keep to access God. But what we realize in the gospel when the son of God Jesus came down to earth what he taught us the main point of what he came to tell us and show us and do for us was that a human's access to God is no longer through keeping laws it's no longer through keeping a bunch of rules but it's through a relationship with Jesus.

Just like my access in that office building couldn't be gained through a card that I didn't have but it could be gained through a relationship I had with the person who did have access. So you and me can get access to God and eternal life through a relationship with Jesus.

[16 : 23] Never forget that. Not through laws because we can't keep the laws anyway. That's what the law is there to show us that we can't get access to God in our own strength.

But now okay so that's the gospel that's what Paul is talking about here but question that still remains is well how did that change the situation between the Jews and the Gentiles? Well you see by removing the law's ability to keep people away from God the gospel also removed the one thing that made the Jews think that they were better than the Gentiles which was the access to God that they could have through the law.

So do you see how it fundamentally changes what the Jews and the Gentiles relationship was? Suddenly that thing that dividing barrier between them which was the law is now a moot point it now no longer applies.

And then what Paul does next in this passage he goes on to explain just why God decided to give access to him apart from keeping the law but by grace alone why would God do that?

What is he what is his plan? Why why does he have the law and then all of a sudden decides to open up access through Jesus to anyone by grace alone?

[17 : 41] Why does he do that? Well this is the reason God did that to create a whole new type of human being who can no longer look down on another human being and think that they're better or any more worthy of God.

That is what God's plan was and that's why he structured and carried out this plan of the gospel with the law and then Jesus fulfilling the law for us because he wanted to make the point to us not just make a point to us he wanted to recreate us into a new world of human beings who have no ability to look down on each other anymore.

That's what the gospel's design and end goal was because look at verse 15 his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two thus making peace and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility.

And so you see in giving the Gentiles access to him through relationship with Jesus apart from keeping the law God doesn't only reconcile people from various nations to himself he also reconciles different groups of people to each other by removing their ability to think that they're better than each other.

and so through the gospel God is making the first type of human being in history who can truly be at peace with their neighbor.

[19 : 13] Because here's the thing our understanding of the vertical relationship with God will always affect our horizontal relationships with other people.

That's why Paul started last week the passage we looked at last week with talking about how the vertical has been fixed first and so now can talk about how the horizontal can be fixed because of the vertical being fixed.

Because what you believe about God what you think your relationship with God is and where you stand with him will always influence how you treat other people.

You might not notice it it might be subconscious but it always will. and a broken understanding of that vertical relationship is really at the heart of all broken relationships on the horizontal in your life and in this world.

And it's the real cause of human conflict throughout the ages. We see examples in history. So take for example World War II and the Nazi Germans.

[20 : 24] Why were they so aggressive and violent towards the Jews and towards the nations that they were invading? Well because they thought that they were the master race didn't they?

In other words they thought that they had been endowed by God to rule the world and that gave them the right to kill others. Their vertical affected their horizontal.

You see? Or what about in our own country with apartheid? Did you know the initial founders of apartheid genuinely thought that they were God's chosen people in a kind of land of Canaan surrounded by godless pagans that they had the right to oppress?

Again, the vertical affected the horizontal and it always does. Even, I would say, with atheists. But how can that be? They don't have any vertical.

Surely they don't believe that God exists but that's exactly right. Their belief about God, namely that he doesn't exist, that there's no creator, will also affect how they treat other people, won't it?

[21 : 27] Think about it. An atheist believes, what do they believe a person is? Well, an atheist who doesn't believe in a creator believes that a human being is really just a random collection of chemicals and atoms which came about through blind evolution and therefore has no intrinsic value and we advance our species through the survival of the fittest.

So if a person is weak, they should die and if I'm stronger than a person, I can take what they have. That really, do you see how even a lack of understanding God will affect the horizontal?

Whatever our vertical understanding is will affect our horizontal in our lives. But also, even in your life and at home, without noticing, your vertical affects your horizontal.

For example, a husband and a wife are having a fight about something stupid, which it always tends to be. But actually, there's a deeper reason, isn't there? And why are they actually fighting?

If you were a fly on the wall and you had to listen to what they're saying to each other, a husband and a wife in conflict. And of course, this is not just husbands and wives, but most people who have fights.

[22 : 38] But I'm just using the husband and wife as an example. Because I think there's something we can all relate with, if not in our own situations now, when we were growing up. husbands and wives tend to fight.

But why do they fight? If you listen to them, well, because they both think they're right, don't they? That's why they fight. They both think that they're right and the other person's wrong. If they didn't, if one admits, okay, I was wrong, the fight is over immediately, but that doesn't happen.

The fight continues as long as each one tries to show the other how they're right and the other is wrong. But you see, the moment we talk about categories of right and wrong, we're talking about the vertical, aren't we?

We're talking about how each of them sees themselves in line with vertical standards, God's standards. And so actually without realizing each person is fighting because they think they're on the right side of God and his law and the other person isn't and they need to show that other person how wrong they are.

Their understanding of the vertical is causing them to fight on the horizontal. Just like it did with the Jews and Gentiles and just like it does in every human conflict where one personal group thinks that they are better or more right or more deserving than another personal group, there will be conflict on the horizontal because of conflict on the vertical.

[24 : 07] And so if that's true, which I hope you see it is this morning, I hope I've proved my point, that the vertical will always affect the horizontal and if that's what's at the heart of the world's lack of peace, then what's the solution?

Can there ever really be true peace in our world or in our homes? Well, yes, but only if our ability to judge ourselves is better or more right than the next person is taken away.

there can only be peace amongst groups, between groups in this world and races and nationalities and cultures if our ability to think that our culture or race or nationality is better than the other is taken away.

And there can only be peace in our marriages and in our families when our ability to think that we are more right than the other person is taken away.

And that's exactly what the gospel does. The gospel takes away our ability to think that we are more deserving or more right than the next person if we understand what the gospel is.

[25 : 22] Because by dying on the cross for me, Jesus dying on the cross for me, what it means is that I no longer have any ability or need to compare myself to others according to God's law because the fact that Jesus had to die for me, what does it mean?

It means that I've already failed to keep God's law, obviously, otherwise he wouldn't have had to come down and take the punishment for me. And it means the fact that Jesus already died on the cross and took my sins for me means that God has already forgiven me and if God no longer judges me by his law, what right do I have to judge someone else by it?

You see how the gospel changes? how you think about the conflict and the person next to you? If you really believe the gospel, you can't possibly think of someone else as below you or less deserving of you because we're all equally undeserving.

And so rather than stubbornly trying to convince your husband or wife that they're in the wrong, you'll realize that you're also in the wrong because you're a sinner and even in the unlikely event that they are totally wrong and you're totally right, you'll be quick to forgive as God was quick to forgive you in Christ.

And so do you see how Jesus coming to fix the vertical fixes your horizontal as well? Do you see that? Because that's what this passage is really all about.

[26 : 52] It's not just about Jews and Gentiles. It's about each one of us in conflict with the people in our lives and how the vertical and fixing that is absolutely fundamental and necessary to fixing your horizontal relationships.

Do you see how if you believe the gospel it will inevitably change how you treat other people? It will enable you to bring peace into situations and relationships that you couldn't have otherwise.

And then when we do that, when we bring peace into situations that seem to have no peace and no chance at peace, well then look what will happen from verse 21.

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit.

Okay, so in having, what this is saying is in having peace with God which then overflows into our earthly relationships, in those being fixed, because of our vertical relationship being fixed on the cross, we Christians become, this is what the passage is saying, a holy temple.

[28 : 12] I wouldn't, unless the Bible said that I wouldn't dare say it, it sounds like blasphemy, but actually we become a dwelling place for God on earth. That's what this passage is saying, that's what a temple is, the temple in Jerusalem for a time was God's dwelling place on earth, but now we, through our relationships with others, reflecting our relationship with God, now become that temple, we become God's dwelling place on earth.

By showing peace and forgiveness in our relationships, we become a place where the world can find God. Think about that.

But would you say that is what characterizes your relationships at the moment? Now let's get personal, which we always should when we read the Bible. We mustn't just read it academically, we must let it get us here.

Would you say that peace and forgiveness is what characterizes your relationships at the moment? Think of your relationship with your spouse, think of your relationships with your family and your work colleagues.

Do people notice something about you in those relationships, namely that you are a peacemaker, that you take barriers down rather than put them up? Because you know what Jesus said?

[29 : 32] Sermon on the Mount, he said, blessed are the peacemakers because they will be called children of God. Our ability to make peace reflects our relationship with God.

You see, it's only those who have truly been transformed by the gospel, who are uniquely qualified to bring peace to this world. And that only happens through the cross of Jesus Christ.

But have you truly been transformed by the gospel? Not just understood it or listened to it, but been transformed by it as Jesus has been born again.

That's what the gospel should do. Have you? Have you been transformed so much that the vertical has changed your horizontal? And is that change noticeable?

Have you been transformed so much that the gospel has changed how you view and treat the people around you? Irrespective of their race or their culture or their wealth or their upbringing.

[30 : 39] Can people see that you are a citizen of heaven? Can people see that you are part of a new humanity that God is making and a place where they can tell God is dwelling?

Let's pray. Yes, Lord, we thank you so much for what you have done to fix the vertical, to fix our broken relationship with you through our inability to be holy, our inability to keep your law, that you sent your son to come and keep it for us and then die for our sins so that we can have access to you.

Thank you so much for that. And Lord, help us to let that change us from the inside out. Help us to let the gospel change not only how we live day to day but how we treat other people.

Lord, would every day, would you help us to ensure that the vertical changes the horizontal? Would you help us to appreciate and embrace the gospel and live it out in our relationships on earth so that people can see you in us, that people can be drawn to you, and that people around us can also come and be part of the new humanity you are making for a new world one day.

Thank you, Lord, for including us in your salvation by grace alone. Amen.