

I. Introduction

- A. When I lived in Chicago, I'd go watch the Chicago Bulls play basketball, or the Chicago Black Hawks play hockey. Both played in the same stadium, called the Chicago Stadium. That place was replaced in 1995.
- B. But the old stadium was a monster. Loudest place I've ever been in my life—even louder than our worship services here at NCR.
- C. There was a main floor, and two balconies.
- D. The entrances were segregated—if you had a ticket for one of the balconies you had to enter through a certain gate, and the hallways and stairways led you to the right balcony. You couldn't reach the main floor or the lower balcony without either going outside and entering a different gate or maybe parachuting.
- E. I sat in the cheap seats, except for maybe 3 times in my whole life, I had box seats.
- F. It's kind of like flying first class—once you go first class, it's hard going back with the riff raff.
- G. When Paul writes this part of his letter, he's concerned about a group of Christians, a group of Christ followers. They are great people, and they've made great growth in the faith.
- H. They are living with Jesus and living for Jesus. Good job.
- I. But there's a problem he's worried about. It is that some of the people in this church will see themselves as second class spiritual citizens, only worthy of the cheapest seats in the upper balcony.
- J. So he tells them, no.
- K. We are a new community, and in the new community, we are all equal. And we are all one. And we all get front row seats.
- L. Let's see how that happens.

II. *11 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision made in the flesh by hands. 12 That at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13, NKJV).*

- A. The Christians seem to be splitting off into two groups: Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had the front row seats; the Gentiles were starting to believe they had back row seats.
- B. Now, I want to get us emotionally right into this text. What about you? How do you feel before God?
- C. If you have Jesus as your Savior, there should be no room in your psychology for second-class status—none. God doesn't like you less than He likes me or any other Christian. God is not punishing you. God is not out to get you. God does not ignore you. God does not neglect you.
- D. God loves you as much as He loves me or Billy Graham or Mother Theresa or any other of His children.
- E. Do you know why? Because when you received Jesus, God placed you into permanent union with Christ. God loves you exactly as much as He loves Jesus Christ. He can't love you more than He already loves you and when you die and go to heaven, He won't love you any more or any less than He loves you today.
- F. There is no second class, back seat children in God's everlasting family.
- G. But it wasn't always this way.
- H. Before you got saved, it wasn't this way. In fact, before you had Jesus these five problems were true of you: You were...
 - 1. Without Christ
 - 2. Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel
 - 3. Strangers for the covenants of promise
 - 4. Having no hope
 - 5. Without God in the world. How many of you know that you can be very religious and still not have God in the world? You can have statues and beads and prayer cloths and idols and incense and shrines, and still be without God in the world.
- I. When you add it up, you get the conclusion in verse 13:
 - 1. YOU WERE ONCE FAR FROM GOD.
- J. God was here, you were here. There was too much distance to enjoy Him. Too much distance to communicate with Him. Too much distance to hang out with Him.
- K. A person without Jesus is a person far from God. I don't know if that describes you today, but that is what Scripture says about a person who has not received Jesus Christ.
- L. But when you do receive Jesus Christ, something happens.
 - 1. Look at verse 13: But now IN CHRIST JESUS, you who once were far off.
- M. What does it mean to be in Christ Jesus? It means to be placed into permanent union with Christ. We talked about this last time. You are joined to Christ in such a way that everything that is true of Jesus now becomes true of you.
 - 1. You share His possessions.
 - 2. You share His status and identity.
 - 3. You share His nature.
 - 4. You share His history.
 - 5. You share His destiny.

- N. On the day you received Jesus, you became a new person, with a new identity, and a new status in the throne room of heaven.
 - O. And that identity and status is an exact copy of the identity and status of Jesus Christ. This is the doctrine of union with Christ. You've been joined to Christ.
 - P. So that Scripture can say, but now, in Christ Jesus—because of your union with Christ—who were once far off have been brought near.
 - Q. For many years of my life I was an Awana leader both at Awana Clubs and at Camp Awana. Awana is a church-based program for kids and it's worldwide.
 - R. One summer, I was at Camp Awana, in Wisconsin, as a leader. I was maybe 20 years old. We were baptizing high school students in a lake. And each student said a few words. The man doing the baptizing was a spiritual giant and one of my heroes. His name was Lance B. Latham, and he invented Awana—he was the founder of all of it.
 - S. Anyway, we were doing baptisms, and one teenage girl spoke into a microphone told how she received Jesus as her Savior, and then added, "I just want to be closer to God."
 - T. That's a good thing to say, don't you think? Sounds spiritual, sounds holy and all that.
 - U. Lance Latham took the microphone and by then he was maybe 85 years old. He took the microphone, smiled at the girl, and said, "If you have Jesus, you can't get any closer to God than you already are."
 - V. And I thought that is so good. I'm going to say that some day.
 - W. So here I am today, saying it. You who were once far off have been brought near. You cannot get any closer to God than you already are. You don't have to stretch to reach Him. You don't have to strain or bust a gut. He is near you, in you, with you, right by your side. And even if you move, He'll go with you. He's in your life to stay.
 - X. It makes no difference whether you've been saved for 50 years or for one week. It makes no difference if you've been a faithful godly Christian, or a spiritual failure with a pile of filthy rags so high you can't see over it.
 - Y. Jesus is never more than a prayer away, an inch away, a moment away.
 - Z. You've been brought just as near as every single other person in this room that names the name of Christ because you've been brought near **BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST**,
 - 1. ...and His sacrifice has more power to connect you to God than your sins have power to separate you from God.
 - AA. That is your reality, that is your deep truth, that is your identity, and that is your true privilege if only you will believe it.
 - BB. The next paragraph takes us deeper.
- III. *14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14-18, NKJV).*
- A. The people who first received this letter were mostly Gentiles. Their city was really a blend of nationalities and languages and religions. Whatever religious background they had was really alien to the Jews who followed Jesus.
 - B. The temple of the Jews in Jerusalem was enormous—the temple complex covered almost 40 acres. Archaeologists say that the perimeter was marked out by a double row of columns, each column 37 feet high—about as tall as this auditorium.
 - C. Within this paved area was a number of courts, and you had to have the right ticket—or the right faith or the right gender or the right nationality—to get inside each court.
 - D. Surrounding the inner courts was a wall, 4.5 feet tall, called the Soreg. It separated the court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Israelites, and the court of the women. The Soreg kept Gentiles from ever coming near the sanctuary.
 - E. One Jewish writer from those days (Josephus) says that there were thirteen giant stone tablets placed all around the wall. They warned Gentiles not to enter **UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH**.
 - F. How would you feel about that?
 - G. Two of these tablets have been found. They read like this:
 - 1. No foreigner is to enter within the court and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.
 - H. Not the world's best method for church growth.
 - I. That wall was a huge symbol of the division between Jews and Gentiles. If you grow up in that era, your first Sunday school lesson teaches you that there are insiders and there are outsiders and you are forever an outsider. Sorry, but that's the way it is. You get the nose bleed section forever, because you are not worthy.
 - J. That division gets reinforced over and over and over all your life.
 - K. Into that depressing thought comes this good news: for He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation.
 - 1. All those rituals that you never understood.
 - 2. All those laws that you could never really keep.
 - 3. All those sacrifices that you couldn't afford to make.
 - 4. All that pre-Christ symbolism—a code you could never crack.
 - L. None of that matters now in your relationship to God.

- M. If the question is **HOW DO I GET CLOSE TO GOD?** The answer is **NOT** through the performance of any laws, commandments, or rules of conduct in Scripture or anywhere else.
 - N. The answer is through Jesus, by His blood (v. 13) and now by His flesh (v. 15, another way of referring to His death on the Cross).
 - O. Here's what the devil does:
 - 1. He gets you looking at other Christians. They seem to have a good life—a blessed life. Their prayers get answered better than your prayers. They are **WORTHY** of more blessing from God than you because they are more holy, or more charismatic, or more sacrificial, or more prayerful. You, however, are a loser, and a failure, and a sinner, and a hairy wart on the face of the church and you should slink away now, and take your poundings from God, because you'll never be as close to God as those super holy saintly people over there with the holy glow and haloes.
 - 2. The devil pulls Christian from Christian and the devil pulls Christian from God.
 - P. And all of it is a lie. Quit believing the devil's lies. It's never too late. You might be 80 years old, and have believed the devil's lies for 70 of those years.
 - Q. Okay, fine. Will you today embrace this truth: that God has brought you near to Him through the blood of Christ; and that whatever barrier there was between Him and you, Jesus demolished it, once for all when He died on the Cross?
 - R. And even more.
 - S. All those people you envy? God has made you **ONE WITH THEM**.
 - T. He has joined Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner, rich and poor, male and female, young and old, slave and free, employer and employee, PhD and GED, pickup truck, family van, or Lamborghini, prayer warrior or prodigal partier, crew cut, flat top, faux hawk, mohawk, spiked, pierced, tattooed, retired, and just starting out, people who shout amen, hallelujah and preach it, and people who think those people are freaks
 - 1. He has joined us all into **ONE NEW PERSON**, one new family, one new species of human kind.
 - U. And your entry tick is **NOT** what you deserve, and **NOT** what you perform—the entry ticket is that you simply name the name of Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and only hope of ever getting in.
 - V. Church
 - 1. The devil wants to split us. But God has joined us.
 - 2. The devil wants us to envy each other, but God wants us to celebrate each other.
 - 3. The devil wants us to suspect each other. But God wants us to trust each other.
 - 4. The devil wants us to exploit each other. But God wants us to bless each other.
 - W. God brought us near to Himself, so we could live near to each other, and not want to strangle one another.
 - X. Verse 18 declares, for through Jesus we both—high and low, insiders and former outsiders—we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.
 - Y. If you have Jesus, you have your all access pass to the throne room of heaven.
 - 1. **ANY VOICE INSIDE YOU THAT MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE AN OUTSIDER IS NOT THE VOICE OF GOD, BUT THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL.**
 - 2. **ANY VOICE INSIDE YOU THAT MAKES YOU TREAT SOMEONE ELSE LIKE AN OUTSIDER IS NOT THE VOICE OF GOD, BUT THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL.**
 - a) We are **ONE** with equal access to God.
 - Z. You have access, so use it. You have access, so draw near. You have access so...
 - 1. *16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16, NKJV).*
- IV. *19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22, NKJV).*
- A. In verse 11, you started out as aliens and strangers—without hope and godless in the world.
 - B. But in verse 19, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.
 - C. You belong in God's home. God has a room for you, with your name on it, in His house and you share that room with a growing, expanding bunch of awesomely cool friends.
 - 1. You are fellow citizens with the saints.
 - 2. You are members of the household of God.
 - 3. You are part of the new spiritual temple of God.
 - 4. You are being built together for a dwelling place of God.
 - D. Verse 20 says that the foundation is built by the apostles and prophets, and Jesus is the chief cornerstone.
 - E. The apostles and prophets refer to the teaching and instructional ministry of the church. These are the people who spoke God's words and these are the people who wrote God's words in the Bible.
 - F. God speaks today in the Bible. We hear God through the Bible—this is our foundation. And it is held in place by the chief cornerstone, Jesus.
 - G. When Paul used that imagery, here's what people pictured. In the early 1990s, archaeologists discovered five massive stones that were part of the foundation of the Jerusalem temple.

- H. The largest stone was 55 feet long, 11 feet high, 14 feet wide, and weighed 570 tons.
- I. That was just one stone in the foundation, and it wasn't the biggest one—we just haven't found the biggest one yet. Because the biggest one would have been the cornerstone, the one set with the most care and the most precision, because all the other measurements made reference to it.
- J. Jesus is that cornerstone. And the only way we can be really accurate is through the teachings of the Scripture—the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New.
- K. God is building something.
- L. God is building a home for Himself, a dwelling place.
- M. We are the bricks. We are the stones. The Holy Spirit is the master builder and the Bible is the mortar.
- N. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, verse 21 happens:
 1. The whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord
- O. Fourteen months ago, a famous author named Anne Rice, turned her back on the church. She became famous writing vampire novels, and became famous again by becoming a Christian.
- P. She got tired of the church; however, not of Jesus.
- Q. She wrote:
 1. “For those who care, and I understand if you don't: today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being “Christian” or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to “belong” to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.”
- R. I wrote her an open letter, and I said this:
 1. Anne, you might follow the steps of countless others who've given up on the institutional church. I get it. I'm a pastor, and I've been pulled that way a thousand times. I live and breathe church people. I see the dark side daily. But I can't get past this:
 2. The unity of the church is Christ's own creation. It is His gift to the world. We who have embraced Him as Savior share the same last name. We don't act like it all the time, but it's true. Jesus loves the church. Please don't hate what Jesus loves.
- S. And Jesus loves the church—us, this room and every room that names the name of Jesus. Jesus loves us together, quarrelsome us, hostile us, disputatious us, and infamous us. He loves us when we're good and when we're bad.
- T. We are God's temple. We are God's dwelling place. We radiate the glory of God and we do that well or poorly, but we do it.
- U. The church is God's plan A for the world, and there is no plan B and in the true church, every child of God is an insider, with all the rank and privileges of Christ.

V. Conclusion

- A. I want to wrap it up by going back to the start.
- B. Verse 11 begins with these two words: **THEREFORE, REMEMBER...**
- C. Everything we looked at today is a reminder to remember something.
- D. Remember what?
 1. The feeling you had before you met Jesus.
 2. The feeling you had the first time you really heard of His Cross.
 3. What it felt like the first time you came to church by choice as an adult and how weird everything was.
- E. What's the point: there are two:
 1. Embrace your insider status with God, and never let the devil pry you away—emotionally, psychologically, mentally, or spiritually. The devil will try to push you back into outsider status—he can't do it, but he can fake you into believing it. Don't let him. Embrace, believe, and exploit to the max your insider status with God.
 2. Never let your insider status make another child of God feel like an outsider. Remember them. Remember how horrible that felt. Remember where you came from.
- F. I look over this audience and I see a huge spectrum: economic, age, education, spiritual history. A year ago, some of you had no clue about Jesus and salvation, and now you're in church every week, born again, and saved.
- G. Others have been living with Jesus in your life for so long, you forgot what it felt like to not have Him. That's good, but it's dangerous because you can easily shove the new kids on the block to the back of the spiritual bus.
- H. What is the answer?
- I. If you're new—or if you feel far away—rise up to your high calling and embrace your insider status.
- J. If you're already there—then make it easy—make it as easy as possible for the next guy, the next gal, to feel as close to Jesus as we all really are.