

Jesus Brings His People Together

Ephesians 2:11-22

October 18, 2026
Rev. Bailey Wagner

Well friends, it seems like this month has been RUF month for us because a couple weeks ago we had the RUF campus minister at Lynchburg come at Liberty, come and share with us what he's doing and how the Lord is at work there. And this morning we have Bailey Wagner who's with us, who is the RUF pastor at JMU. So RUF again is Reform University Fellowship. It's our campus ministry for our denomination. As I said a couple weeks ago, we really like RUF around here. It does great work on the college campus. And so Bailey is going to come and share God's word with us. Bailey's been with RUF for just a few years, but this is his first time being with us at CTK. So he wanted to make sure to come and greet y'all. We support his ministry, his work, have sent students like our own Sarah Knowles and others who are involved in his ministry. And so we're very, very thankful for RUF and for Bailey. So Bailey, welcome.

It's good to be with y'all. Like Penny said, I'm Bailey Wagner. I have a girl's name, so you might have been confused when you saw that in the bulletin, but don't worry. I can't tell you how many freshman girls text me and think that I'm a freshman girl. It's the weirdest thing that I do. Like Penny said, I'm the RUF campus minister at JMU, the greatest university in Virginia. If you disagree with me, we can talk about that later in the Narthex or whatever you call that area. But I'm really glad to be here. My role as a campus minister is to reach and equip students with the good news, to reach them with the good news of God's grace and to equip them for a lifetime of loving and serving the local church. And one of my favorite ways to serve the local church is to be in places like this and to share God's Word. And as we do that, I want to invite you to turn to the book of Ephesians. It's page 976 and 977 in your Pew Bible, also on the screen. And I want to invite you to listen. This is the Word of the Living God, Ephesians 2:11-22:

“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. And as God's word, we should go to him and ask him to be with us as we consider it. So pray with me.

God, we come before you thankful that you are not a distant God, but you're a God who is personal and so personal that you give us your word, that you've given us your word to direct us how we might glorify and enjoy you. And Lord, if we're honest, we need you to meet us here. If we are to gain anything from the reading or the preaching of your word, we need you, Holy Spirit, to come and fill us and work in us. Lord, if we are honest, we all come here in a variety of places. Some of us wrestled children in the minivans and were tired and it felt like a battle just to get here. For others of us, we've had too much coffee and we're so excited and we're almost jittery and we need calm. Wherever we're at, Lord, would you meet us? Would you give us what we need? Open our eyes, unclog our ears, so that we this morning might see the Lord Jesus as more good, more beautiful, and more true. And so we pray it all in his name. Amen.

It's a very human thing that we do to try to put ourselves in groups and find things that divide us from other people. And I learned this especially the hard way my first semester at JMU. It was the first nice day. I started in January of 2024. It was maybe the first nice day of the spring. My three-year-old at the time was maybe six or seven months old and I said, you know what, I'm going to take the three-year-old for a walk and give my wife a little break. So the problem was I was wearing a t-shirt that was of my alma mater. And my alma mater, Appalachian State, is actually now a rival of JMU. And I was wearing the most obnoxiously gold Appalachian State shirt I owned. And I said, *I'll walk around town. This is the friendly city. That's what they call Harrisonburg after all.* And what I received from the members and the township of Harrisonburg was not friendliness wearing enemy colors. I got dirty looks. I got comments. And what I learned was I can't wear Appalachian State stuff unless I'm like cutting my grass and no one sees me. Right? We all, it's just this very human thing that we all want to find ways to look at other groups of people, people that we might even be close with, and say, *I know better, I do better, I am better than another group of people.*

This morning, we're looking at this dynamic happening in the church of Ephesus. Paul is addressing a church where division is present, where there are rules in place that are meant to separate people. And Paul is giving this church this beautiful picture that Jesus has come not to divide his people, but actually to unite them, to bring them together. The big picture I want you to see with me this morning is that the good news of God's grace, the gospel, it breaks down our barriers. It doesn't cause us to build barriers. It actually causes them to be broken down. And we're going to see this in three ways. So if you take notes, this is in the bulletin, this is for you. Three things, that Jesus brings hope, Jesus brings unity, and then lastly, Jesus brings belonging. So hope, unity, belonging. Let's hop right in.

Jesus Brings Hope

First, hope, that Jesus brings hope where none had been before. In the church in Ephesus, there are two distinct groups of people. You might have caught on to this in the reading. There's Jewish people and then there's Gentiles. Jewish people are Abraham's children. That's to say that they were God's Old Testament people, that these were people who God had made promises to, saying, I will be your God and you will be my people. And they had a long history of being God's people. They had hope in a coming Messiah. They had hope in the promises of God. The other group in this church, the Gentiles, are kind of the exact opposite. Essentially, what it means to be Gentile is just to be not Jewish. And these Gentile Christians, what Paul is showing them is that apart from Christ, before the coming of Christ, they had no promises that they were heirs to. They had no hope. They had no relationship with God. Paul

says it like this in verse 12, “remember that you at that time were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope without God in the world.” Paul telling this group essentially on their own, they had no hope. And Paul's not trying to beat them up here, but if you look at verse 13, there's really good news: “But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” I want you to see what's going on here with me. Jesus has taken these people who were far off, and by his blood brought them near. That he's taken people who did not have God's promises, and he has made them heirs to God's promises. He's taken people who had no hope outside of themselves, and what has he given them? Hope.

This is all true of these people, because Jesus has come to rescue sinners like them and like us. And what Paul is saying is that it's Jesus's blood, Jesus's work on the cross that has brought them near. It's Jesus and his sacrifice has washed away their sins, and through faith made them children of God. And what I want you to see as we think about that is that Jesus gives us what we lack. On our own, our outlook is the same as what we're reading in Ephesians, that in our sin we are hopeless, we are helpless, we are alienated and strangers to God. But by grace, Jesus moves towards us in our hopelessness to give us what we need. And what we need, what Jesus gives us, is himself. What we need is for Jesus to be with us, to move towards us, to forgive us, even when it's the last thing that we deserve. And Jesus sees us dead in our sins, hopeless on our own, and he moves towards us to forgive us, to bring us near, to secure our way to God. And that's a truth that will not change, regardless of our sin and our failures, regardless of our ancestry, regardless of how we feel. That Jesus moves towards you, he moves towards me, and he gives us hope.

Fun fact about me, I was in middle school at one point in my life. I haven't always been a bald 30-year-old. Before I went to middle school, I grew up out in the country in North Carolina and kind of had a middle school that was kind of scary. Maybe you went to middle school like that, maybe you're in a middle school like that. The summer before middle school started, thinking about what was coming ahead of me, I was a nervous wreck. Looking back on it now, it was almost like I was being sentenced to prison, which middle schoolers here, it's not that bad. I survived. But I was so afraid of going to middle school. I felt helpless. I felt hopeless. And I don't think I told anyone that I was feeling this, but I had a grandpa, a peepaw, as we called him where I'm from, who knew what I was struggling with. And the night before sixth grade, this is in the days of landlines, my grandpa called our house and asked to speak to me. And he gave me some advice about facing my fears, and I don't really remember what he said. But then what I do remember is that he said, “Bailey, I love you. You're going to be okay. And no matter what, I'm here and I'm with you.” And hearing him say that gave me hope.

Because I knew no matter how bad middle school was, no matter if I got beat up or didn't make the basketball team, you know, which all happened, well, the beating up maybe not as much, but just a little bit. Knowing that no matter what I faced, that he was with me gave me hope that at the end of the day I could endure what was coming to me, that the bad things that I was afraid of weren't going to be as bad as I thought because my grandpa loved me, that I wasn't alone. And what Paul is saying to these Gentile Christians is that you are not alone, that Jesus has come to rescue you. Jesus has come and brought you near, and you have a great and sure hope in that truth. And I think as we think about this, the question we should probably be asking ourselves is how does Jesus meet us in our hopelessness right now? What are the things that we feel like we have no hope in, and how is Jesus entering into that with us? Maybe you're here today, and the thing that feels the most hopeless for you is suffering.

What's true of all of us is we either have experienced suffering, we're experiencing it right now, we will experience it. And when we experience suffering, the word we could say is it feels hopeless. We wonder if God is present at all, if he's doing anything. But the way Jesus interacts with us in our suffering is he points us to the cross. Our hope is in the fact that we have a Savior who is not distant from suffering, but a Savior who he himself suffered. He knows what it means to suffer physically, emotionally. We can actually look to the cross and see this awful picture of the worst thing that's happened in human history, the innocent man dying on the cross as the place where God is most at work. God's greatest redemptive act is the cross, and we can look at that and say, God is at work. God is with me in my suffering. Not only is he with us, but Jesus rose from the dead, defeating sin and death once and for all, and he promises to return, to deal the final blow, to end it once and for all. But Jesus is a Savior who suffered, and one day he will end the suffering. He'll wipe away the tears from our eyes.

Maybe the thing you experience right now is just deep loneliness. It's so lonely, it's excruciating. All you want is for someone to see you. Maybe, you know, you talk to three-year-olds all day. Maybe your kids just moved out of the house. You're empty nesters for the first time. You don't know what to do with yourself, and all you want is a friend or a spouse or someone just to move towards you. But friends, what I want you to hear is that Jesus is the one who sees you and moves towards you, that he moves towards you and actually, by faith, brings you into a community to be known and to be loved. Maybe the thing that feels hopeless is you're just exhausted. The grind is never slowing down. Work feels like it always is picking up. It's killing you, but Jesus calls you to himself, and he says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. What I want you to hear, friends, is that Jesus has come to give hope to the hopeless.

Jesus Brings Unity

So the next thing I want us to consider, this is our next point, is that Jesus brings unity to his people, that Jesus brings unity, that Jesus tears down the things that keep us divided. The Christians in Ephesus that were Jewish and Gentile, they were different, but they weren't just different. Jewish people at this time wouldn't have associated with Gentiles because they would have seen them as unclean. In some ways, these two groups would be more likely to actually be at odds with each other than anything else. The Jewish people had this identity that they were set apart from the rest of the world, and really what this is connected to would be the ceremonial law. We kind of get a picture of this in verse 11 when Paul says, "you who are called the uncircumcision by the circumcision." These Jewish Christians would have likely demanded that the Gentiles adhere to specific rules to be part of the church, and their performance would have dictated whether they were in or not, or whether they were maybe fully in or not is another way to put that. But Paul is saying to these Christians that Jesus has come to break down the barriers that stand between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. And the question is, well, how does Jesus do that? And Paul gives us the answer in verses 14 through 18. He first says that Jesus is our peace, and through his life and death that we now have peace with God, and therefore we also have peace with one another. That Jesus then has accomplished that peace by what Paul says is abolishing the law, the law that divided these Christians. And abolishing the law, what that means is there is no performance, no outward signs you have to do to be part of God's family. What he's saying is that your place in the church is not earned.

Lastly, Paul says that Jesus kills the hostility, that as he's rescued a people to be reconciled to God, he's gathered them into one body, killing the hostility between us. What we're seeing is

that Jesus rescues a people from their sin, people from every tribe, every tongue, every nation, people with real cultural differences, and he brings them together. That Jesus creates a community where your place isn't earned by following a law or following a rule, but it's given by grace. If we can be honest, it's easy to read this and say, you know, bless their hearts in the first century. We don't do this kind of thing anymore. But if we're honest, division amongst Christians is not just a first century thing, it's a Christian thing. Because we're sinners, it's easy to make a church, it's easy to make any Christian community a place where you have to perform to be accepted. It's easy to make any church or any Christian community a place where you have to earn your place. Maybe you have experienced something like this. This is kind of what that looks like, and I'm just going to say this is bad. I'm not saying we should do these things. But maybe you've been a part of a Christian group and they say, "oh, do you drink alcohol even in moderation? Well, we don't do that here, so you have to stop that completely or you have to leave." Maybe you've been in places where you say, "what? You let your children participate in Halloween or watch Harry Potter" or something like that? "No, we don't do that here. You can't join if you do that."

Those are kind of silly examples, but often we do this. And when we do these things, when we put rules in place to say this is how you're either in or out, what we're ultimately saying is that we don't believe that Jesus has moved towards us first and by grace rescued us. We're actually saying that we've earned our place and we expect others to earn their place as well. I think the best example of this that we get culturally is the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, if you're not familiar. There's been a Netflix documentary about the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, and it's really fascinating because to become a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, you, one, have to be a female, so they wouldn't let me in, of course. But more than that, you have to be a great dancer. You have to be fit. You have to be pretty. And you have to have like an "it factor" that is in nowhere written down. It's just kind of a subjective thing. And as you watch this series, you will follow lots of young women who say, *I want to be a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader*, and they're amazing dancers, they're beautiful, and they try to get into this thing, but they have to earn their place, but they also have to earn their keep. And all this stems from the fact that 30 years ago, the leaders who now run this organization earned their spot, and they feel like they have to uphold the standards. They have to make subjective rules that these girls have to abide by. They have to create a hard barrier between in and out. And as you can imagine, this is a documentary, when you watch this happen, it's a community, really, that's riddled with anxiety of people asking the questions, have I done enough? Am I good enough? Am I going to get kicked out because I haven't done enough? And it's exhausting.

Paul is saying in our passage that Jesus is the one who has earned everything you need in order to be accepted by God, in order to be made right with God, and he gives it to you as a gift of grace. And what that means is you don't have to earn your place in God's family. You don't have to earn your keep. That Jesus has accomplished it all. He's broken the barriers, and he's made his people into one body. And I think the question we have to ask ourselves then are what are the barriers that we have created to keep others out? What are the things that we say, I have earned this, and others have to earn it in order to be a part of a church or a community group or any kind of gathering of Christians? Maybe it's theological. You say, "we have hard lines in the sand, and you can't disagree with me on secondary issues," right? We all want to acknowledge that there are real theological disagreements that we can say you are not a Christian if you don't believe in the Trinity, perhaps. But on how we understand baptism, on how we understand other secondary issues, is that a rule that we use to keep people out? Maybe the thing that you want to use to keep people out is to say, "I'm taking

holiness seriously, and I know who is a bigger sinner than me. They don't take holiness seriously. They have no right to be where I am.” But when we make barriers like these, and you could probably imagine more, what we're saying is we believe that I've earned my place and someone else has too. But what I want you to hear is that Jesus has come to rescue sinners by grace, and that's true of you. That's true of every person that has faith in Jesus, no matter who they are. You've been accepted by grace, and the grace that we receive, it doesn't divide us. It actually brings us together. It brings unity. So, so far we've seen that Jesus brings hope, that Jesus brings unity, but the last thing I want us to look at is to see that Jesus brings belonging. He brings belonging to his people.

Jesus Brings Belonging

That's our last point, that Jesus takes strangers and aliens and gives them a place to belong. Look at verses 19- 22. I'll read this real quick: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” There's a lot we could say here, but the thing I want to draw your attention to is this language about the temple. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and later the temple was the place on earth where God's presence dwelt. It was the place where Jewish people worshiped. And thinking about these Gentile Christians and using this temple language, when we think about the temple, Gentiles actually had very, very limited access to the temple because they weren't Jewish and they would have been considered unclean. So there was an outer court of the temple that the Gentiles were allowed into, but they weren't allowed to go in any further. And so what Paul is telling these Christians, who because of their ethnicity were not allowed into the temple, what he's telling them is that through Jesus they are joined together and they are the temple. That the place where God dwells isn't a building, but it's in them by his Spirit. That they are so loved and accepted by God through Christ that God now dwells in them. Where they weren't allowed to get close to God's presence at all, God now dwells in them.

And I just want you to imagine, like put yourself in the shoes of a first century Gentile. Imagine how wild that would be to hear that, that you who were not allowed into the temple are now the very place where God dwells. What Paul is doing as he's saying this, is he's making it abundantly clear that these people who were once considered outsiders are now insiders because of what Jesus has done. They were far off, but Jesus has brought them near, so near that God by his Spirit dwells in them, that they have been gathered into the household of God. And this is meant to be a comfort for them. It's a comfort to people who are asking the question, “am I really in? Does God really love me or am I excluded because of my ethnicity?” It's a comfort for people asking the question, do I belong? What's true of all people is we all want to belong to something, and we will do anything we can to kind of make that happen.

One of the interesting things about being an RUF campus minister is I watch thousands of freshmen land at JMU every year, and they quickly say, “I have to find a place to belong or else I'm not going to survive,” and they will do anything to make it happen. We do the same thing. We dress a certain way to be accepted by a certain crowd. We act a certain way. We do certain things all so we can belong. But when belonging is something that we earn, it either builds up our pride. We say, “look at me. I've earned my place in this community.” Or we can't do it. We don't get accepted like we think we should, and it leads us to despair. I was

raised in a church that had a Christian school, and I did not go to the Christian school. I went to public school. And for as long as I can remember, that made me an outsider in this community that I was a part of. In Sunday school or later youth group, I felt like everyone knew more about the Bible than me because they learned about the Bible in school, and when you go to public school in North Carolina, you don't learn about the Bible. Fun fact. The church always felt like a place I would never belong. I was too behind. I was too secular. I didn't have the means to go to this public school.

Adults literally pitied me my whole life because I didn't go to the right school, and I thought that would be true for me for a lifetime of being a Christian. Maybe you're here today, and you feel something similar. You're considering the claims of Christianity, and you're wondering, *is the church a place I can actually fit in?* Maybe you've recently come to faith, and you just feel like you're behind, and you're wondering if you'll ever stop feeling that. What I want you to see is what Paul is telling the church in Ephesus. What he's telling them is also true of you. It's true of all Christians that God has loved you first, that he has sent his Son to rescue you. He sent his Spirit to live in you, and it's not because of what you know. It's not because of what you've done. It's not because of who you are. It's a free gift. It's all grace, and what that means is you belong to Jesus, to his people, in the family of God, no matter what, all because of faith, all by grace. And if that were really true, which it is, but if we really believe that, what would that do to us?

Well, one, I think it would give us confidence that no matter what God has said, you are mine. You are my treasured possession, and that's not changing. And if that's not changing, if our identity is so sure in who God says we are, then you can hear no to a promotion and weather it. You can be rejected from grad school. Someone can say no to a second date and it not ruin you, because you know that you'll never lose your spot in God's family. So it will give you confidence. I also think it would give us courage, right, that if our identity is in who God says we are, we can show up into spaces that we're afraid of. We can go talk to people who are wildly different than us. Why? Because what God has said about you is most foundationally true, that a rejection won't matter.

Lastly, I think it means that we can welcome others into a community because we can look at a space like the church and bring people in because you know that their spot, like yours, isn't earned. And you can just bring people to say, come and hear this good news, come and rest in the finished work of Jesus with us. So if you hear anything this morning, we'll land the plan on this. So if you fell asleep, wake back up. We'll be done in two minutes. Here's what I want you to hear, that God's love for you, it doesn't cause you to move away from others. It doesn't cause us as a community to build barriers that divide ourselves. It doesn't cause us to find ways for others to earn their place. It actually does the opposite. That Jesus came to earth, lived the life we should live, died the death of a criminal in our place, so sinners like you and I can be forgiven, so we can be redeemed, so we can be renewed, even though it's the last thing we deserve because of our sin. And what Jesus has done for us is He tears down the walls that divide. Jesus comes and gives us hope where we had none before, right? He finds people who are far off and gives them a place to belong. And my encouragement to you is to trust that Jesus has done that for you, maybe even trust it for the first time, and trust that Jesus is doing that work in you by His Spirit right now. Let that be the thing that moves you towards people who you disagree with. Let the truth that Jesus hasn't made you earn your spot be the thing that causes you to welcome others in. Let the reality of what Jesus has done give you the deep sense that He loves you and is for you. And my encouragement to you is to rest in that because it's true, and it's true for you. So, let's pray.

God, thank You for the truth that You have sent Your Son to live in our place, to die in our place, to be raised from the dead, so that those who are far off, sinners like me and like our friends here, can all be brought near, so strangers and aliens can belong, so the hopeless can have a great and everlasting hope in a Savior. Lord, help us believe that. Drive that truth deep in our hearts, so we might go from this place loving You more, loving one another more, and loving this city more. So, we pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.