Hear the Word of God:

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—12 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. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 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, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22, ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Praise be to God.
Good morning Christ Community. My name is Andrew; I’m one of the pastors with our church. Now before we really get into the message this morning I have an announcement. As part of this announcement I’m going to review or summarize the series of talks and then I’m going to give you the skinny on the foundations class. I want you to follow this; I want you to know where I’m going.

FOUNDATIONS CLASS
This morning we’re continuing a series of talks we started a few weeks ago called, You are Jesus. In this series we’re studying through the Letter to the Ephesians and what you see is that for the Christian (let me describe what a Christian is), a person who has repented or repudiated and turned from their life of independent self-salvation, self-determination, and self-fulfillment and come to put their faith in Jesus depending upon God’s grace for salvation, direction, purpose, and meaning, God relates to that person, the Christian as though they were Jesus.

Paul, the guy who wrote Ephesians under the inspiration of the Spirit of God also wrote another letter where he described this new identity and new relationship with God this way in Galatians 3:26-27, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” The preview is about to turn into an announcement now, so watch this. What this means is exactly what we’re saying in the You Are Jesus series. Through faith, which is the other side of the repentance coin, you are “in Christ.” If you are in Christ, his identity is your identity. He is the Son of God, so now you are a son or daughter of God.

But then he says that it is through baptism that you put on Christ. Baptism is an external sign and seal declaring that you belong to Christ and his people. When Paul talks about putting on Christ, imagine putting on a robe. When a person is baptized they are cloaked in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus that saves us, and makes us children of God and it’s the death and resurrection of Jesus that binds us together as a new family to one another.

Okay, so at last here is the announcement. We’re going to baptize people on Sunday November 3rd. I want to invite you who having heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, and repenting and receiving this message as good news, to be baptized. I want to invite you to put on Christ by putting on the external sign of his death and resurrection for you.

If you want to be baptized, or if you’re unsure but want to explore I want to invite you to the Foundations Class. Its three weeks and it starts tonight at 7:00pm. If you want to be baptized this year at Christ Community or think you might want to then we want you to be part of this class. In reality the class is open to anyone and I think it will be beneficial to most. If you’ve been baptized here in the past and you didn’t take this class, come now. We’re still getting our act together in these matters so we’d love to have you as well. The class will be here, bring your Bible, bring your brain and we’ll go over the foundational teachings of Christianity together.
Let’s turn our attention toward the passage Bob read for us this morning, Ephesians 2:11-22.

Charles Patrick Norman is a convicted murderer, convicted for a crime he maintains he never committed, but that’s really beside the point for our story. On the day he was processed, checking in for a 32-year, all expenses paid reservation at a Georgia State penitentiary, he met a man—or should I say what was left of a man—being discharged, released from prison. His reservation was up; he was going home. Norman never got the man’s name, but he referred to him as the Ghost of Reidsville, Reidsville being one of the hardest prisons in the south, This ghost of a man had spent 15 consecutive years in what inmates know as “the box” but it is officially known as solitary confinement. Utterly isolated from live human beings for 23 hours a day.

Norman’s human experience, even one that includes incarceration left him grasping for words to describe what he encountered that day. The ghost’s body had atrophied, leaving him incredibly frail, white, exposed, even translucent—decimated. However, the lasting impression on Norman was the hollowness of the ghost’s eyes. The lack of human contact had emptied him. Here was a shell of a human, but it was something less than human. Norman recalls a trip to the Houston Zoo as a young boy with his grandparents. There he encountered a gorilla, in something of a prison cell. Empty, but for a single old tire, a sad excuse for whatever it was supposed to be there for. The eyes of the ghost and the gorilla were the same. The ghost of Reidsville, who at one time was a man, was one no longer.

CREATED FOR COMMUNITY
Regardless of your philosophical perspective or religion or worldview, I suspect you will agree with me that humans need community, relationships of depth and meaning, security and love, intimacy and trust. The loss of community, whether by forced isolation or a chosen seclusion in some way negatively impacts our quality of life. If isolation and loneliness are driven to extremes it often leads to some kind of mental break and lets loose some form of insanity.

Christianity asserts that the human species requires community, relationships of depth and meaning as much as they need air and water. Such an assertion flows from the teaching of the Bible that humans are created in the image of God. Now you might think of several implications of what it might mean for humans to be created in God’s image, but one implication is that we must be created for community. Why must this be so, you ask. It must be so because God is a trinity, a tri-unity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons in one true and living God, equal in power, substance, and glory. This explains why our longing for community feels so deep and primal. It’s how we’re made after God’s image.

Thus when God creates the first man, Adam, and he is without sin, in the glory of God’s creation in Eden, and with God, God declares that it is not good. Why? It’s not
good that man would remain alone. Alone he becomes the ghost of Reidsville. By himself he could never image God; he needed a partner. So God created Eve, the first woman. Now this, God said, was very good. A community was formed. They lived together before God and one another without shame, without posturing for status or position, without guilt.

This is exactly the kind of community that we were born to enjoy. However, if we’re honest, most of our relationships fall short of our desires, something is off in our experience of community.

COMMUNITY LOST
I really liked how these writers describe our problem when it comes to community,

“Within our pursuit of relationships there is something darker and more sinister than your God-given desire for community. It’s the tendency to use people to meet your own needs first. It’s not hard to see how often we are self-focused, pursuing our own interests and protecting ourselves from people and relationships that demand too much of us. For example, think of the times you’ve intentionally avoided someone who bothers you. Or the times you’ve said what people wanted to hear in order to avoid offending them. Or the times you stopped pursuing certain friends because they were no longer useful to you. Or the times you’ve clung to bad or unhealthy relationships just to escape the feeling of being alone.”

Put simply, we are far more self-interested than we are truly concerned for others. If you’re honest many of you look for community that will help you achieve whatever goals you have while minimizing your personal costs. Put another way, we want community that is easy, a community that conforms to your personal preferences. And when a community or relationship fails to conform what happens? People tend to either attack or withdraw from the community.

Let me be clear, this problem doesn’t just exist “out there.” No, it abounds “in here” as well. Few pastors know this to be true as well as the Apostle Paul. He oversaw numerous conflicts and divisive factions in the church. For this reason, when the Apostle Paul addresses Christians in the Letter to the Ephesians he reminds them of their new identity in Christ, specifically he reminds them that in Christ a new community is formed. The old ways of relating to one another have passed and a new pattern has emerged.

From Gospel-Centered Community by Robert H. Thune and Will Walker
The apostle employs a simple outline in Ephesians 2:11-22. He opens by reminding them who they once were. He ends by reminding them who they now are. And sandwiched between he tells them how this identity transformation came to be.

WHO YOU WERE
In verse 12 five successive phrases describe the former identity of Paul’s readers. They were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. These terms are so strong, it’s unlikely that none of the readers would have described themselves this way at that point in their lives. They may have admitted some estrangement from others and self-centeredness when it came to relating to others, but hopelessness and Godlessness can likely only be seen by those who have been “enlightened” by God himself.

Notice who is addressed in this opening section. It’s the “Gentiles in the flesh,” the “uncircumcision.” Nothing fractured first century Christian community like the issue of circumcision. Under the old covenant God gave the people an external sign, a mark that signified a man as part of God’s people. That sign was circumcision. While circumcision was very private and unseen after the event itself which occurred 8 days after birth it was highly important for Jewish people, those people who related to God under the old covenant. It was a tangible sign of your relationship to God and his people.

Now imagine this, from a Jewish perspective here, there were the Jews, the insiders, the “us,” those who bore the mark of God’s people, who were serious about their faith, who had been elected by God and inherited the promises of the covenant. This was understandably seen as a privileged position.

At that same time, there was everyone else, the Gentiles, the outsiders, the “them,” those who were not part of God’s people, who did not bear God’s mark. They were outsiders looking in.

Now frankly, as you can imagine, these Gentile men and women were largely very happy to be outsiders. In fact, they saw themselves as the insiders and the Jews, with their strange religious practices and one God and silly flesh markers as the outsiders. I mean just think about this, I would guess every adult, non-Jewish male was quite content to remain an “outsider” and so refrain from any of the Jewish markings, if you catch my drift. You think we have a hard time seeing men convert to the church today. Try getting them to convert to the synagogue, you following? We’ve got it made.

Now imagine this, and this is what Paul is describing here, two groups of people who have historically, at the least, avoided one another, whispering behind each other’s backs, but more often than not there has been ethnic pride leading to exclusivism, pretentiousness, and racism. Communities are divided up along the lines of ethnicity and personal preferences. The Jewish people were snobbish and exclusive boasting in
their law keeping. And the Gentiles were equally so, boasting in their freedom from the law.

Both groups may have tolerated the other, but deep down there was a sense of superiority, and what is Paul’s solution to the problem of fractured community? His solution is to remind them who they were: separated from Christ, alienated from God’s people, strangers to the promises, hopeless and Godless. Now catch this, he says remember. That is an imperative. The command is to remember, recall, bring to mind the time when you were separated from Christ, alienated from God’s people and his promise, hopeless, and Godless.

But, you say, that’s not very positive, that’s not uplifting. That will damage my self-esteem. And I think that’s the point. You need to remember that you were called of God out of your self-salvation project that was a sinking ship. You need to be reminded of your sinking ship.

Some of you are struggling to see the relevance of these verses because the circumcision thing is so out of touch for us. Circumcision may seem like a strange issue to fight over. But it’s not so strange when you think about it. We certainly have our own boundary markers, like circumcision—which we use to determine who is “really spiritual” and who isn’t. Replace circumcision with political views, theological perspective, small group involvement, preferred Bible translation, summer project attendance, campus ministry involvement. All of these are good things. But you can replace circumcision in our passage with any of them.

“Remember at one time, you liberally-minded democrats, you were separated from Christ.”

Remember at one time you Calvinists and you charismatics, you were separated from Christ and his people.

Remember you ESV toting, summer project attending, John Piper-loving, Cru student you were separated from God’s promises and hopeless.

Remember you Bible memorizing, disciplined, Navigator, at one time you were Godless.

Do you see? Whatever the issue, you can put it in here and it works. Here’s the thing scrupulous people tend to identify themselves by these things. While skeptical people identify themselves by their freedom from these things. But either way, whether we’re the scrupulous or the skeptical this old pattern of community has passed away according the Apostle. We no longer or subject to relating to one another based on these preferences because a new community has emerged.
WHO YOU ARE
This new community is described with three metaphors in verses 19-22. But notice how he opens, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens.” There is a story here. It’s a story of how you passed from one thing to another, from a past identity to a new one. As you remember your former identity, you must also recall your new identity as well. What you were you are no longer. You were estranged from God and his people, but not anymore.

Citizens in God’s Kingdom
Instead, you are fellow citizens with the saints. No longer are you estranged from God’s people, but you’ve been brought into a new nation, a new citizenship in the City of God. Citizenship is a political image. In a first century city like Ephesus strangers and aliens were non-citizens who were afforded only minimal rights and protection. But full citizens had the full protection and rights within the city to which they belonged.

Citizenship implies a responsibility as well. As citizens we have a responsibility to the laws and mission of the City of God. The law in sum is this: Love the King and love others. The mission of the City of God is the expansion of her borders through telling strangers and aliens about the King and inviting them to allow our King to transfer their citizenship to a new and better City.

But citizenship doesn’t fully capture this new community. The new community is something more than coming under God’s kingly rule. It includes being adopted into his household.

Members of God’s Family
Not only do we have a place in God’s kingdom, but we have a place at God’s table. Not only are we brought into citizenship generally speaking, but we have the kind of citizenship of Malia and Sasha Obama. Intimately known and intimately loved by our King.

Membership in God’s family means that we share a table not only with the King, but with the rest of his family as well. Our family table is incredibly diverse. The table includes those who are presently divided by ethnicity, nationality, upbringing, economic status and all other earthly distinctions that currently wrongly separate us including our personal preferences of what community should be like. In the presence of divine love, these real differences become petty. We lose sight of them when our eyes are fixed upon our King. This brings me to our final metaphor. Paul says this entire citizenship, this household is being built together into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God.
A Holy Temple
Some of you will be familiar with other parts of the Bible that speak of the individual believer as a temple, but that isn’t the nuance here. Paul is saying that the new community, a collection of individual citizens and household members are being built together into a holy temple. The new community is the dwelling place of God.

Much could be said about the temple in Scriptures. It’s a theme that runs from the very beginning of the Bible through to the very end, Genesis to Revelation, but the primary thing you need to know is that the temple is the place where God’s people worship in God’s presence. Is all of life worship? Yes. Is God everywhere and therefore is all of life lived before the face of God? Yes. But the temple reminds of life in the Garden before sin and it looks forward to the future rest of God’s people in his presence. In community, we worship corporately, we worship together, we unite in the praise of the One true God who has come near to us and chosen to live among us.

Listen to me now; to those of you in Christ this morning, you are a new community. You are citizens of God’s kingdom. You are members of God’s household. Together, we are a holy temple; inhabited by the living God.

What brought about this change of identity? How is it that people have passed from strangers and aliens to citizens and household members? How is it that former enemies are now like stones happily lying next to one another in a temple of prayer? How did we pass from a self-serving person to a self-giving people?

HOW THIS NEW COMMUNITY CAME TO BE
In verses 14-18 the Apostle explains how this new community came to be. He opens by saying those of you who were far off have brought near by the blood of Christ. What are you brought near to? You are brought near to God. How was this made possible? By the blood of Christ. You see God doesn’t make light of our sins. He doesn’t sweep our backbiting, reputation seeking, prejudice posturing, and self-focused bent under the rug, simply choosing to ignore it. No this sin-corrupted nature leads drives a wedge between God and man, a chasm that widens with each day as we run further and further to escape his presence.

Reconciled to God
But God took the initiative, while we were still his far off enemies, God placed the sins of every race, every ethnicity, every language group, every person from every kind of company in the entire world and he placed them on Jesus Christ his Son, and blood was shed. Christ endured hell on the cross, separation from God and his people.

Yet because Christ was separated from God for our sin and sent far off, we are brought near to God and reconciled to him by Christ’s blood. Therefore, Christ himself
is our peace. Christ has absorbed God’s enmity for our rebellion and in doing so he removed the wedge; he bridged the chasm and has brought us who were far off near.

The work of Christ doesn’t just make us tolerable to God. God doesn’t now relate to us, but only begrudgingly. No we have complete access to him. The way a father is accessible to a beloved son, so is our God near to those who are in Christ Jesus.

This reconciliation with God through Christ dramatically reshapes our priorities in community.

*Reconciled to Others*

Our cultural differences may still distinguish us, but they no longer define us. Look at the second half of verse 14 and 15. Its speaking of Christ. He “has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.” Christ demolished our barriers to community. That’s what it means. How? “By abolishing the law.” What Paul is saying is that the old cultural and religious boundary markers like circumcision are nullified. They are not in play any more. Now if the boundary markers that God made for his people under the old covenant are dismantled, how much more so are the boundary markers that we’ve invented?

When you become a Christian, you will retain your cultural affinity, but it’s no longer your primary identity. Now you are in Jesus! In him you share his identity, no matter what your history, culture, and position in life, your new identity has transitioned you from a segregated, hopeless, and Godless existence into a new community, a citizen of God’s Kingdom, a member of God’s family, and together a holy temple, indwelt by God himself.
The Letter to the Ephesians (Pillar New Testament Commentary)
By Peter T. O'Brien
Using the fruits of recent biblical research, Peter O'Brien shows how Ephesians sums up God's magnificent plan of salvation in Christ and spells out his divine purpose for believers today.

Ephesians (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)
By Clinton E. Arnold
This commentary provides the main point, an exegetical outline, verse-by-verse commentary, and theology in application in each section of the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians: Who Do You Think You Are?
By Mark Driscoll
Sharing much in common with the campaign and sermon series by the same title, Pastor Mark’s book on Ephesians is packed with great insights, direct application and tons of facts.

The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians (New International Commentary on the New Testament)
By F. F. Bruce
This commentary series is recognized by pastors, students, and scholars alike as a critical yet orthodox commentary marked by solid biblical scholarship within the evangelical Protestant tradition.

Sermons on the Book of Ephesians
By D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Ephesians: ESV Study Bible Notes
By S. M. Baugh
The ESV Study Bible combines the best and most recent evangelical Christian scholarship with the highly regarded ESV Bible text.