

Back to Church Sunday Week 1 - Together We Find Peace
Pastor Joe Oakley
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Good morning and welcome to Back to Church Sunday! We are so excited to join with other parts of the body of Christ across the country to reclaim the true nature of the church as a place of love, peace, and hope for our friends, neighbors, communities, and world.

The Church is the representative of Christ on earth and sometimes we have done a lousy job of that. I'm sure that everyone here today has a personal story and experience with the church—some good, some bad and painful. For those of you whose experience with the church may have been painful, I'm sorry. For all of you, no matter what path has brought you here today, let me say that we are honored to welcome you and to get to know you.

Together is the theme of our Back to Church Sunday. It's also the theme of a sermon series we'll be preaching, based on the book of Ephesians.

As I thought about togetherness and what it means for us as followers of Jesus, I thought of . . . Legos. That's right. You know this favorite childhood toy, right? Those small plastic bricks with little raised circles. Who could imagine that these pieces of plastic are worth billions of dollars? Literally, a fortune. The Danish toy company that introduced Legos in the 1950s is the world's most valuable toy brand – worth \$7.57 billion!

Individually, Legos are just cheap pieces of plastic and by itself a Lego can accomplish nothing. Except cause great pain when you step on one left on the floor! But despite their basic design, the magic is in the way they fit together. Legos are designed to be together—and together these plastic pieces can be made into fantastic creations. Full-scale models of castles, cars, airplanes, spaceships have all been built from Legos. It seems that Legos can be put together to create almost anything. They are just pieces of plastic - but together they create something much bigger and better than the sum of their parts.

The church is like Legos—a collection of individuals of various sizes, shapes, and colors. Individually, we may not be much to look at—but when we come together the way God intended, we form the Church, which is a creation much greater than the individual members. God takes our chaos and, by His design, makes something spectacular and gives us purpose.

Legos don't work without togetherness and life does not work without togetherness! God did not design life to work without Him or His family! That's why He invites us to be together with Him and together with one another on this journey of transformation.

Whether you're a regular member, a first-time visitor, or on the fence about church, I invite you to commit to joining us for this four-week journey, where we will explore what the concept *Together* means for us individually, as a church, and as a part of our world as a whole. Over the next four weeks, we will discover together how we experience peace, love, strength, and purpose together!

Let's start this journey with a bit of a road map. The guide for our journey is the book of Ephesians. While in prison in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to a group of believers in the city of Ephesus about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection; that letter is the New Testament book of Ephesians. It's a short book of the Bible—just six chapters—but it's a beautiful and powerful book. And togetherness is a theme that Paul comes back to again and again.

The ancient city of Ephesus was located in what was called Asia Minor -which is now modern-day Turkey. Deb and I have been there to see the ruins of this once powerful port city that was once considered the most important Greek city and an important trading center in the Mediterranean region.

The Romans made it a provincial capital, and it was home to the Temple of Artemis—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. So Ephesus was big and bustling, with many people coming and going to worship or do business or pass from one region to another. In the early history of the church, Ephesus became a place of evangelism where the gospel spread quickly and many people came to be believers.

Paul had previously spent time in Ephesus as a missionary, so he knew the culture and the challenges this group of believers faced. He knew that they were a multi-ethnic group, surrounded and challenged by other ideas, beliefs, and practices. Not unlike our church today, the church at Ephesus needed the strength of unity to grow and survive.

So Paul wrote this letter to encourage and instruct the young church. And he structured the letter in a way that is easy to follow. The first half of Ephesians basically looks at the gospel story—how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection changed the world. It describes God's redemptive plan to bring people together with Himself through Jesus. The second half of the book focuses on practical ways we should live in response to God's grace and relate with each other.

Ephesians begins by revealing to us the mystery of God's eternal plan. Ephesians 1:10 says:

And this is the plan: At the right time He will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.

This is not speaking of universalism where everyone will be saved no matter what they believe. Nowhere does the Bible teach that.

The phrase “to bring everything together” literally means "to bring back to and gather round the main point." It means to bring things back to God’s original intent in creation.

Sin caused great damage to God’s creation. It caused mankind to be separated from the presence of God. It caused evil to run rampant and hurt many people. We live in a fallen world, but God has a plan of restoration! That plan includes the restoration of unity in and through Christ. At the close of the Messianic Kingdom, the Great White Throne judgment will take place at which all lost human beings, fallen angels, and demons will be judged and cast into hell. Then, according to Isaiah 65:17 – God said –

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.

One day the earth that was cursed by sin will be brought back to its pristine state, the saved of the human race will live on the new earth, and the endless eternal ages will begin. Romans 8:20-21 says:

Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay.

God will accomplish all this restoration work in and through the Lord Jesus and His atoning death on the Cross. He is the Head; the center around which God revolves everything He does in relation to sin and salvation.

There will be a time when we enter into uninterrupted joy and peace. But, we can experience peace together now. So many people want peace, but it seems to be unattainable. That’s because there is no peace without the Prince of Peace! As Ephesians 2:14 says:

For He Himself is our peace.

Our world seeks peace in so many different ways. We seek peace among nations, peace in our cities, peace in our families, peace in our churches, and peace in our own minds and hearts.

In the world, peace means an absence of war– conflict – disagreement. But, the Bible talks about a different kind of peace – a peace that is more than an absence of conflict. 2 Thessalonians 3:16 says:

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

The Lord of peace will give us peace at all times in every way.

This verse is not talking about the absence of conflict. We must understand that peace is not defined as the absence of conflict or problems.
 Peace is having inner calm in spite of outer turmoil.
 Peace is having inner tranquility despite other's hostility.
 Peace is being at rest in spite of the mess.
 God wants us to experience peace no matter what is going on around us.
 This peace was promised by Jesus who said in John 14:27:

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Peace that Jesus gives is not the absence of trouble, but is rather the confidence that He is there with you always. But, we have to pursue peace and resist fear and a troubled heart. And we must pursue it together! Ephesians 4:3 says:

Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.

As we explore the concept that Together We Find Peace, we will see three ways to experience God's peace together. Ephesians 2:17-22 says:

Christ came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. 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.

1- We Experience Peace in Unity

Do you ever find yourself searching for a place to belong? Searching for a way to be part of something bigger than yourself? Where do you experience that sense of belonging? Paul says that the body of Christ—the church—is our place of belonging, rooted in the restoration and unity brought by Jesus. There is no peace without unity. Psalm 133:1 says:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

The New Century Version says:

It is good and pleasant when God's people live together in peace!

So, which is it – unity or peace? It's both! There is no peace without unity. By the way – unity is not uniformity.

We are all different, but we are all the same in this regard: we are all sinners who need the grace of God! Ephesians 2:8-9 says:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

When we recognize that it is grace that has saved us, it forces us to open our arms and hearts to everyone. Grace does not allow exclusion. Instead, it brings us together in unity.

Paul goes on to explain in verses 14-16 how Christ's purpose was to unify the two major divisions of people—Jews and Gentiles. By including these two groups, Paul is basically including everyone. Those who weren't Jews were called Gentiles. But Paul clarified in Ephesians 2:14:

For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

The context here is God's peace destroying hostility between Jews and Gentiles – but the application for us is that God's peace can destroy the hostility and barriers between husbands and wives, family members, co-workers, different ethnicities and yes – even different political views!

God's plan through Jesus is to save us from sin and from ourselves. To deliver us from our selfishness that causes divisions between us. That's what brings real, lasting peace. Obviously, that peace will not be completely realized until Christ returns to complete God's ultimate restoration. But through Jesus' death and resurrection, the door to peace is open to us all.

Paul is clear that we find peace in unity, but that does not mean in uniformity or sameness. The church at Ephesus was full of diversity, and the goal was not to change this. The goal was peace and unity in the midst of those differences. It's the same goal for the church today.

What would happen in our lives and community if church was a place to come together in peace and allow God to remove all dividing walls of hostility? Let's be a people of unity, peace and grace!

2- We Experience Peace in God's Presence

We live in a world that seems increasingly full of discord and anxiety. News stories demonstrate every day that as a population we struggle with anxiety, depression, and isolation. Headlines proclaim divisions and conflicts of all sorts, from personal disagreements to political wars. We need peace!

Paul is crystal clear in verse 14 that Christ Himself is our peace.

Peace is not a thing. It's a person. We find peace in relationship with Jesus. And we experience it as a fruit of God's Spirit living in and through us. Peace isn't something we can create in ourselves; the Holy Spirit in us brings peace and enables us to live it out.

Together, we are citizens, family, and most importantly, a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. Our struggles do not magically disappear when we place our faith in Jesus – but now - in the middle of our struggles we can experience peace, because we have the presence of the Holy Spirit. And we can share and offer peace to others, even when struggles or disagreements arise.

So what does peace look like in our lives this week? I can tell you first what it is not. Peace is not ignoring differences, conflict, or reality. Peace is the presence of God in His people. And His presence enables us to experience peace and to remind each other and the world around us that He is the source of all peace.

Where anxiety and fear are strongest, we can be a living reminder that God cares for us! The Amplified Version of 1 Peter 5:7 says:

Cast the whole of your care (all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all) on Him, for He cares for you.

Knowing God is with you and that He cares about you results in peace!

3- We Experience God's Peace by Being Built Together

Wouldn't it be nice if we could find peace once and be done with it? But peace is not just a one-time event. When faced with an unpeaceful world, Jesus invites us to return to Him and to each other again and again. Through His death and resurrection, He made the way of peace available to each of us. When we surrender to His power and accept His life, we embrace the way of peace.

But what about the fact that peace seems so temporary and fragile? It seems that peace can be interrupted or destroyed in an instant. One phone call can destroy it!

The good news is that as believers our peace goes beyond a circumstance or a feeling. In fact, our peace is the never-changing, always-present Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is with us continually and is our source of peace.

But we all need reminders, encouragement and support. We all need others to relate with in unity and share peace and bring it into a world that needs it. And that's where the church comes in. Paul closes Ephesians 2 with this:

And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

Like those Legos we talked about earlier, we fit together to form the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit fills and enables us with the peace of Christ.

Why do we come back to church, and invite others to join us? Because coming together here does not just put us *in* the church. Instead, it is here that we realize we *are* the church—and as the church, God dwells with us. Like Jesus said in Matthew 18:20:

Where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them.

So we come together to live and worship in unity, to collectively turn our focus to Jesus and experience the source of our peace, and to offer the way of peace to the world. Together we are so much greater than the sum of our parts. Together we encourage and support each other when we are weak. Together we reflect the nature and peace of God.

Jesus wants you to experience peace in your life. But peace in life starts with having peace with God. And peace with God only comes through Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 says:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some of you are in storms that seem like they'll never end and I'm here to tell you there is no peace without the Prince of Peace. You've tried everything to try to find inner peace and rest, but nothing seems to help.

You've searched for peace in a bottle – and only found addiction.

You've searched for peace in your business – and only found busyness.

You've searched for peace in isolation – and only found loneliness.

You've been searching for something to bring rest to the turmoil of your life. I assure you, there is no peace without the Prince of Peace. Give peace a chance means to give Jesus a chance.

There are many people here today who have searched for peace in something else – but we've found it in Jesus!

I urge you to accept God's gift of peace by accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. You can leave here today in peace.