

THE ACT THAT HEALS RELATIONSHIPS

Fourth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Understanding and Repairing Our Relationships* from
Ephesians 2:11-22

“But now in Jesus Christ you who were formerly far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”
Ephesians 2:13

I assume you’ve heard the news that was all over the media last week. In the drama of Jesus’ crucifixion, Judas was really the good guy! An ancient copy of a long-lost gospel has been discovered: the Gospel of Judas. The Gospel of Judas informs us that the man the apostle John identifies as an embezzler of Jesus’ ministry funds (John 12:6); the fellow Matthew says sold out Jesus to his enemies for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:15); the guy Jesus called in John 17:12, “*the son of perdition*,” that is, “the son of damnation”; and of whom he said, “It would have been better for him if he had never been born” (Mark 14:21)—this Judas was Jesus’ best friend among the disciples, the only one who truly understood him. Judas actually helped Jesus by arranging his crucifixion. And if he made a couple of bucks on the side, well, hey, it doesn’t matter. The good he did outweighs any wrongdoing.

The Gospel of Judas is one of several “Gnostic” gospels. We’ve had evidence of its existence since about 180 AD when Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon, condemned it as heresy. The word *Gnostic* literally means *knowledge*, but it’s not the kind of knowledge you and I think of. Gnosticism is a philosophy that beckons us to a spiritual kind of knowledge that one can only experience through contradictions. You and I think of knowledge in terms of verifiable facts and objective truth. That’s what the gospel writers—eyewitnesses of what Jesus said and did—were giving us when they penned their gospel accounts. The Gospel of Judas was written 140 years after Jesus died. It wasn’t trying to be historically true. It wants you as a reader to experience a higher, non-rational truth, by presenting what was evil—Judas’ betrayal of Jesus—as something good. You say, “that’s nonsense.” And that’s exactly the point. In nonsense you experience *gnosis*, or spiritual knowledge. A present day example of the same thing, a conscious revival of the old Gnostic heresy, is Dan Brown’s book, *The Da Vinci Code*, which has sold 44 million copies worldwide and will be a blockbuster movie when it is released on May 7.

The Da Vinci Code’s phenomenal success ought to help you realize that a lot of people will take the Gospel of Judas seriously. Why? The reason is that a number of scholars say that the traditional Judas story, which paints Judas as a villain, has produced much anti-Semitism. So, if Judas can be recast as a good guy, then animosity toward the Jews will diminish. It will bring people together instead of driving them apart. The equivalent is, if you have a relationship problem with some other person because of a bad thing they have done, and then we say, let’s call the bad thing they did “good” That will make the problem go away and you’ll be reconciled. But it doesn’t work that way, does it? Something else has to happen. Someone needs to repent. Someone must seek forgiveness. And then you must wait for the hard feelings to subside. This isn’t an easy thing to do. Over the past three weeks we’ve been talking about understanding and repairing our relationships. The past two Sundays we’ve been discussing why we have relationship problems. We’ve said it may be because of things we’ve done, or it may be

because of things others have done. Today I want to begin considering the healing of our relationships. Please turn to Ephesians chapter 2. In this passage we'll see three things.

1. A Review of Broken Relationships, 2. A Revolution that Bridges the Gaps, and 3. A Reconciliation Between God and Us, and Us and Others.

1. A Review of Broken Relationships. Let me begin by drawing your attention to the first three verses of Ephesians 2. The apostle says, *"You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."* This is what we discussed two weeks ago. Each of us was born with an inclination to disobey God. Paul reminds us about what happened in the Garden of Eden and how the devil drew Eve into rebellion against God. That soon spread to Adam and led to their estrangement from each other. We followed that up last week and saw how far and how fast sin destroyed the basis of human relationships. Cain, the first baby in the world murdered his brother Abel. The whole human race is caught up in sin. Judas sinned when he betrayed Jesus. And sin is the core of every broken relationship.

I ran into a friend of mine whom I had not seen in some time, and we began to exchange dog stories. He owned a boxer named Otis who was dead-set determined to run free. My friend installed one of those invisible fences where the dog wears a collar that shocks him if he crosses the buried wire. My friend set the charge at half. Otis paid no attention. He'd take off at a run and leap across the electronic fence. The collar would shock him, but Otis would shake off the pain and then continue on his merry way. So my friend turned the shock up to full blast. But he felt badly for the dog and didn't want to hurt him, so he rigged the collar to beep whenever the dog walked near the fence. If Otis went farther, he'd receive the shock, but my friend expected that the dog would learn from the beeping just where the parameters were. However, Otis kept running free, and the funny thing was that the battery on the collar kept going dead. My friend couldn't find any defect or short circuit in the collar. It was a mystery until one day he noticed that Otis was lying just inside the fence line with the collar beeping continuously. He kept watching and after a long time, the battery ran out and the collar stopped beeping and of course, it was no longer able to shock him. When the beeping stopped, Otis stood up and strolled into the neighbor's yard. As you can imagine, that created a certain amount of tension between Otis and his master, and between the master and his neighbor.

Isn't that like us? We are so determined to go on sinning that we keep discovering ways to negate the warnings and evade the pain, and then we head off to do as we please. The result is broken relationships between us and God and between us and the other people. As we've said, sometimes the cause of our relationship problems is the result of our sin. Sometimes it's the sin of others. Sometimes it's both. Notice how Paul puts it in verses 11-12. He is speaking to the new Christian believers in Ephesus. Some of their families had lived in the pagan culture of that city since the time of Abraham in 2000 BC. *"Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' which is performed in the flesh*

by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” In other words, in each of our backgrounds there is this separation from God. As a result we or our ancestors lived in spiritual darkness, intellectual confusion and the pain of damaged relations with others. We or our families felt the disapproval of God. We experienced unrelenting war and bloodshed, tears and grief. We had no hope that things would ever get better. Maybe you are experiencing that today and your soul cries out for some glimmer hope and healing.

2. A Revolution that Bridges the Gaps. While the citizens of Ephesus languished in their misery, God started to do something about human trouble. He came to Abraham, who himself was living in the thoroughly pagan environment of Ur. Brian Crist is one of our Cornerstone members serving with the United States Army in Iraq. He recently sent me pictures he’s taken of the ruins of Ur. Four thousand years ago Ur was one of the great pagan metropolises in the world. Notice in verse 12 that Paul refers to *“the covenants of promise.”* God met Abraham in Ur and said to him, “I want you to come to the land of Canaan--now the land of Israel—and serve me there.” And Abraham left everything behind and went. Then in the mountains of Canaan God made a covenant with Abraham and his family and he promised that one day he would send a savior to rescue the human race. Paul wants us to realize that God didn’t do this out of any obligation. Up in verse 4 he says God gave this promise because he is *“rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us.”* In verse 7 he mentions *“the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”*

Now fast-forward 2000 years to the city of Jerusalem. It’s a bright April morning. Abraham’s family, the Jews, were ruled over by the pagan Roman empire. The temple and the worship of God labored under self-serving Jewish political hacks who did not believe the promise of God. Up on the eastern heights Jesus mounted a donkey and began to ride down the road toward the city. Around him his cheering disciples formed a phalanx, pushing their way through the gathering crowds. Tens of thousands of pilgrims had traveled from Galilee to attend the Passover. These people had heard Jesus preach and had witnessed his miracles. They were convinced that he was the Messiah God had promised. “Hosanna!” they cried. “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

If you had been watching that day, and hearing the crowd’s loud acclamation, you would have expected that Jesus would ride straight to the citadel at the temple compound, overthrow the government, and take the throne. But he didn’t. Paul wants us to understand where the road that Jesus was following actually led. In verse 13 he says, *“Now in Christ Jesus you who were formerly far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* How was he going to do this? Paul tells us in verse 15: *“By abolishing in His flesh the enmity.”* And how would he do that? Verse 16 says, *“through the cross.”*

Those of you who have driven up Route 19 across West Virginia have crossed the New River Gorge Bridge, the longest steel arch in the world, 850 feet above the New River. For months the two sides of the arch had been stretching toward each other until at last, on May 13, 1976 the final girders were to be riveted into place. Dignitaries would

gather. The governor of West Virginia was scheduled to arrive by helicopter. And then, with a clang that could be heard for three miles, one of the pipes supporting the southern half of the arch snapped, and the steel plates sagged several inches closer to the northern arch. The engineers frantically reran their calculations. How could the impossible have happened? Was the bridge still stable? They decided it would hold, but if the steel expanded in Summer heat, it could collapse. They determined to go ahead. The steelworkers agreed to do the job, but as they swung out in a small steel box to take up their positions, they heard and saw things that they'd never experienced before. It unnerved them and the box was returned them to land. Hasty consultations followed. Finally the top man from the American Bridge Company climbed into the box with the steelworkers to assure them, and rode with them to the gap between the two sides. The governor's helicopter landed on the south side. A crane lowered the steel beams. The steelworkers secured them. Everyone cheered. Later, the boss discussed his experience. "Being in that box was terrifying," he said, "but, you just do what needs to be done."

Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God, was raised up on the cross. The sins of sinners like you and me were placed upon him and the judgment of God that we deserve fell upon him. He literally endured hell itself. He made a complete payment for sin by shedding his blood. He bridged the gap between men and God with his own body. He just did what needed to be done. Now look at the result.

3. A Reconciliation Between God and Us, and Us and Others. Look at what Paul says in verse 16. He reconciled "*them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.*" The first necessary step was that God's anger toward us and our anger toward God should be ended forever. Everything hinges on that. Paul explained to the Christian believers in Ephesus, both Jews and Gentiles, how Jesus had paid for sin to reconcile them to God, but something more had to happen. Back in verse 8 Paul reminds us that we are saved "through faith." In other words, we cannot do anything to save ourselves. Christ has to do it all. If we are going to receive the salvation Jesus has purchased, we must place our trust in Christ and what he did on the cross. We must receive him as our savior. But there's a problem.

In 1953 a freelance photographer was assigned to the inaugural platform as President Eisenhower was sworn into office. He happened to take a picture that included four Presidents—Eisenhower, Harry S Truman, the outgoing President; Herbert Hoover, and the man who would become President sixteen years later, Richard Nixon. Over the years the photographer managed to get each of those men to sign his photograph except for Harry Truman. One day he happened to be at an event with Truman and he pulled out his photograph and asked Truman to sign. Truman bristled. Jabbing at the image of Nixon Truman said, "I wouldn't sign a picture with that SOB Nixon in it. He called me a traitor!" Then he drew back his fist as if to throw a punch. You and I are a bit like Harry Truman. Jesus died, but we are still angry at God. If we're going to believe in Jesus, we need a change of heart. So in verse 18 Paul says, "*Through [Christ] we...have our access in one Spirit to the Father.*" God sends his Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds and he persuades and enables us to believe in Jesus. Changed hearts then—the work of

God within us—brings us to love God in response to his love for us. The relationship gap is closed.

If our hearts have been changed in this initial act of reconciliation to God, those same changed hearts within us now enable us to be reconciled to other people who have likewise believed in Jesus and whose hearts are changed. This is what Paul says in verse 15. *“That in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.”* We’re all pretty familiar these days with computer dating. A whole industry has sprung up matching couples. But back in 1964 the computer power in your wrist watch required whole rooms filled with whirring machines that shuffled hundreds of punched cards. Alan Cook saw an ad in the *Los Angeles Times* promising for a \$50.00 fee to send him names of 25 young women who had similar scores in a variety of categories. Alan was in his mid-twenties. His previous dates had been rather unsuccessful, so he paid the fifty dollars and soon received a letter from a girl who had received his name. They corresponded for a few weeks and then one morning in April Alan arrived at Bonny’s apartment for their first meeting. They felt like they already knew each other as soon as they began to talk. They drove a hundred miles to the San Diego zoo. By that time they were holding hands. That evening they kissed good night. Four months later they were married and have been together ever since. How is it that people who are extremely different, like the Jews and Gentiles Paul was writing to in Ephesus, could come together and be reconciled to each other? Simple. They had been made to be alike by Jesus Christ. They were lost sinners. Their hearts were changed by the Holy Spirit. They placed their faith in Christ and he saved them by his blood. The experience of being reconciled to God is so strong that it enables people who have been at odds with each other to be reconciled, one to the other.

Verse 13 once again: *“You who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* When Barb and I visited the game preserve in South Africa four weeks ago, we spotted a pride of lions. As we gazed at these magnificent beasts, our guide pointed to the lions’ paws and said, “If a lion takes a swipe at you and hits you in the head, it’ll break your neck.” We drove off road to get close to them. I stood up in my seat to get a clear picture with our camera. A low growl burbled from the throat of one of the lions. “Sit down!” our ranger said urgently. I sat down. He said, “The lions think you are part of the Land Cruiser. But if you do anything to cause them to think you are separate from it, they’ll attack.” From that point on I tried very hard to be a piece of truck. All the more amazing then, that last September, up in Ethiopia, a 12-year-old girl was beaten by men trying to force her into a marriage. She managed to escape. The men searched for her and found to their surprise that she was being guarded by three lions who were cuddling her instead of eating her. The girl’s pursuers ran away. Dear friends, are there lions in your life? The good news is that if you both come to Jesus, the impossible becomes possible. Deadly enemies who would just as soon tear each other to pieces, if they have found their way to Christ, can now become like the lions and the girl: Reconciled to each other.