

“God’s Answer to Loneliness”
Ephesians 2:11-22

“In children, it is the real reason behind dropping out of school, and out of life. It sets in motion actions that lead to outcast status and antisocial behavior. In adults, it’s a major precipitant of depression and alcoholism.” “It can make you feel unloved and unwanted, socially inadequate, angry and critical of others.” What is it? Loneliness. The following quote is a pretty good summary of the research I did in preparing this message: “Loneliness is a universal phenomenon. To feel lonely is to join the rest of humanity is acknowledging that we are somehow fundamentally separated from each other. While we suffer a solitary existence, we are social animals, needing each other, to connect, to bond, to love. It is the paradox of human existence to seek to fill a need that can never be satisfied, to fill the vortex of loneliness in our lives.” Isn’t it incredible that as our world gets “smaller,” as technology enables us to connect with more people more easily, that loneliness is on the rise, is becoming a bigger, more pervasive problem in our world and especially in our country? In my research, I can’t recall a single group of people that isn’t struggling with this problem. The American Council of Life Insurance conducted a study in an effort to identify the most lonely group in America. Which group do you think is the most lonely: college students, divorced people, the elderly, housewives, single mothers, or welfare recipients? The most lonely group is college students! We do a good thing when we remember and pray for our college students each Sunday. Is there a solution to loneliness, or is it true that it is “the paradox of human existence to seek to fill a need that can never be satisfied”? That same quote spoke of being “somehow fundamentally separated” from each other. That phrase, “somehow fundamentally separated,” points us to what God declares is a major cause of loneliness – alienation. Alienation is the sense of being separated from, cut off from, isolated from other people, people we should be connected to, people we should be in meaningful relationship with. Alienation produces anger, frustration, hostility, and yes, loneliness. Our passage today offers God’s answer to alienation and its destructive byproducts, which is found in Ephesians chapter two. In His answer is also the promise that the need to connect, to bond, to love can be satisfied.

The first point is the statement of the problem. In sin, we are alienated from God, which is addressed in the first half of the chapter, especially verses 1-3. And in sin, we are alienated from one another, which is addressed in the verses we just read. That’s the statement of the problem: our sin, our desire to put ourselves at the center of the universe, with everyone and everything existing for our wants, our desires, our pleasure, has produced in our lives alienation from God and alienation with others. Sin doesn’t attract us, it doesn’t connect us; it drives us apart, it cuts us off from one another.

The second point is God’s remedy for that problem. The solution is Jesus Christ, and what He has done for us on the cross. Through His work on Calvary’s tree, verse 16 tells us that Jesus has put to death the hostility between us and God by reconciling us to Him. Before we were Christians, we were cut off from God; we hated God. Now, as we’re in Christ, we’re reconciled to God, and in that reconciliation, a love relationship has been established with Him. In addition, Jesus has destroyed the alienation that exists in human relationships. Verse 14 speaks of Jesus being our peace, having broken down the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility that existed between us. Having solved the problem of alienation and its resulting loneliness, Jesus has created an entirely new community, an entirely different type of relationship.

This brings us to our third point, found in verses 19-22. Here we have three familiar descriptions of the church, which John Stott has called a “new society, God’s new society,” an entirely different community of people in which alienation has been replaced by reconciliation; division and hostility have been replaced with unity and peace; hatred and loneliness have been replaced with love and friendship. We are “fellow citizens with God’s people,” that is, members of God’s kingdom. We are “members of God’s household,” which means we’re members of God’s family. And we’re part of “a holy temple in the Lord,” a personal part of the center of worship and praise God is building in His people. I want to focus our attention for a moment on being members of God’s family, because I think it speaks most directly to God’s answer to loneliness. I know that for some of you, the idea of family may not bring pleasant, positive thoughts to mind. You may have grown up in an abusive family, you may have grown up with no family at all. Please know that being a member of God’s family is positive and healthy and even glorious! I think one of the really remarkable passages in the Bible is I John 3:1, where John writes, “How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called children of God!” It’s

such an incredible thought that it's simply overwhelming to him, and he adds, "And that is what we are!" It's like he's saying, "Can you believe it? In Jesus Christ we're God's children, the objects of His love that He extravagantly lavishes on us!" If you doubt you're really part of God's family when you become a Christian, realize that to become a member of any family you must be born into it or adopted into it. God's Word uses both terms to describe what it means to be a Christian. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7; also 1 Peter 1:23). In Ephesians 1:5 we read that "in love, He (God) predestined us to be adopted" as His children in Jesus Christ. That's what it means to be a member of God's household, His family.

The question can be asked, "That all sounds wonderful, but what does this community of believers look like in practical, real-life terms?" One way to answer that question is to look at the repeated exhortations in the New Testament about what we are to do for one another. The Apostle Paul, in particular, used the Greek word for "one another" almost 40 times to encourage us as a church, to encourage us in our relationships with one another. I'd like to list for you a number of them. As you listen, think of what personal relationships look like in God's family, the church. Romans 12:10 says that as Christians we're to be "devoted to one another" and "honor one another." As members of the church we're to "edify" (that is, build up) "one another" (Romans 14:19). In Christ, we "accept one another," (Romans 15:7) and "encourage one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). That is, we inspire courage, strength, the will to push on with each other. We "pray for one another" (James 5:16), offer "hospitality to one another" (1 Peter 4:9), and enjoy "fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7). We "forgive one another" and we're "kind and compassionate to one another" (Ephesians 4:32). We "live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:16) and we "serve one another." The following are qualities of our life together that are cited more than once. We're told five times to "greet one another," that is, speak to, acknowledge, get to know one another (Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). We're to "bear with one another" (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13), and "carry one another's burdens" (Galatians 5:13; 6:2), which means we're to help and support the friend who is struggling, in need. We're to "submit to one another" (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5). And of course, we're encouraged no less than 12 times to "love one another" (Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; Hebrews 10:24; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 5). As you reflect on these "one anothers," let me ask you, who wants to be part of a church like this? Who wouldn't want to be a part of a group of people who relate to one another like this? These exhortations are a profile for doing God's will in His church. These "one anothers" are also a profile of what the Spirit of God is committed to doing in our lives, our relationships in His new society, His church. Let me point you to a passage which speaks of God's commitment to see this happen in His church. Ephesians 3:14-21 is Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians. Starting in verse 16: "I pray that out of His (God's) glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints" (God will do this in our lives together, in community) "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." This is the goal God has for us, together, that we will be filled with the fullness of God! His love, His peace, His joy, His life, alive in its fullness in our life together!

On your outline I ask the question, "Will you commit to become the type of church family God's talking about in His Word, a 'one another' church?" It doesn't just happen. It requires a response, a decision on our part. Here's an opportunity to get directly involved in making that vision more and more a reality in this, your church. You heard earlier this morning about "One to Another," a ministry that's been in the planning stage for more than a year and is now ready to launch. I strongly encourage you to consider being a part of this important ministry, which I believe is going to have a major impact for good on the quality of our life together in this church. The goal is an ambitious one, that all of us are connected in a meaningful, caring way to others in our church family. Not that all of us are connected to everyone else (that's simply not possible). But that all are connected to some others in a personal, "one another" way. One of the best ways that we can declare God's love and life to lonely people in our community is to be the people, the church God's called us to be, a "one another" church. Surely that church is living a life that is distinctly different from the life of too many who do not have Christ, who are not members of God's family, who are not in "God's new society." Won't you consider how you can make God's vision for us your vision, our vision and how together, blessed and empowered by the Spirit committed to this very work, we can bring this vision to reality?