

Ephesians: Living in Sync with Reality
Part 5: Dividing Walls Broken Down

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Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

I. Dividing Walls in Our World Today

In verse 14, Paul speaks of a “...barrier... dividing wall of hostility.”

Today, the Iron Wall stands as a barrier that separates the Gaza Strip from the State of Israel.

Walls like *this wall* may have been put up – so it was argued – to provide safety and refuge.

And yet, thousands of people – including women and children – have been killed on both sides of that wall.

Walls like this one reinforce a sense of us vs. them. Reinforce a sense of “the people on the other side of that wall are the enemy.”

But there are a whole bunch of other sorts of walls that divide groups of people today as well.

There was a time not too long ago when signs existed that said, “no colored allowed.” And the racial divide between Whites and Blacks in America – and in this country too – continues to be real thing.

Here in Canada, we know about the brutal mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples.

We live in a world of division. We live in a world where harmony between people of various ethnic backgrounds, racial categories, and Indigenous status or lack-there-of simply does not exist.

II. Former Division

In verses 11-12, Paul starts by talking about the former division that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles.

And Paul tells us a few things that characterized what it meant to be a Gentile. These include being “separate”, “excluded”, “foreigners”, “without hope”, “without God in the world”.

The Gentiles are “*called ‘uncircumcised.’*” Klyne Snodgrass, in his commentary on Ephesians, says that Paul is reminding the Gentiles that they were once bad-mouthed by Jewish people.

But before we get too hard on the Jewish people, let’s remember what kind of status the Jewish people had in the first century. They are *not* the dominant force in the world. They are a minority group – a somewhat oppressed group – living within the Roman Empire.

In the book of Acts, we read that the first disciples of Jesus – who were all Jewish – gather around him after his resurrection from the dead and they say to him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6b)

But Jesus didn’t just come just to elevate the status of the Jewish people. Nor did he come just to make the Jews nicer to the Gentiles.

Jesus came to bring true reconciliation between these two groups. And he came to transform the very boundary lines of who’s in and who’s out among God’s people.

III. Christ Destroys the Barrier

We read that Christ “...destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations...” – **Ephesians 2:14-15**

“The legislator [Moses] surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other peoples in any matter, being thus kept pure in body and soul... worshipping the one almighty God.”

– *Letter of Aristeas*

In the biblical story, God enters into a covenant with his people Israel – sometimes called the Mosaic covenant – after he delivers them out of Egypt. He gives them the 10 commandments and a whole bunch of other stuff about how they are to live as his covenant people.

But Paul will tell us in Galatians 3 that the law as a “guardian until Christ came” (Galatians 3:24). Yes, it functioned and did what it was supposed to do for period of time.

But with the coming of Jesus comes a new covenant. A new agreement between God and humanity. Comes a new way of relating to God.

Through the work of Jesus, the Mosaic covenant is no longer binding in the same way. And so, this wall of Torah that once separated Gentiles has, in a sense, been knocked down.

Many commentators think the “barrier” or the “dividing wall of hostility” that Paul had in mind in Ephesians 2 is *this literal wall*.

A wall that was a concrete illustration of the way that law once excluded Gentiles.

Christ, through his death on the cross, *has destroyed that barrier!*

The wall that once separated the two groups has been knocked down!

“Jesus [breaks down walls] from day one of His ministry. He breaks down all kinds of walls to offer a drink to a Samaritan woman. He breaks down all kinds of walls to go to the house of a Roman [officer] whose child is sick. He breaks down all kinds of walls to touch those with leprosy and other kinds of ‘uncleanness.’”

– Darryl Johnson

IV. One New Humanity

“...His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity...” – **Ephesians 2:15**.

My daughter loves painting. Part of her love of painting involves mixing the blue and the yellow – or whatever two colours she’s got – together.

As you know, when those two different colours mix together, it doesn’t make the blue an upgraded version of blue or the yellow a more super-awesome-looking yellow.

It makes something totally new. A new colour emerges.

Jesus’ work creates one new humanity. In him, we become a new human race. Not Jew, nor Gentile, but something totally new. Some have called it “a third race.”

That’s what God creates through Jesus.

Not only does he destroy a dividing barrier. He creates this *new, multicultural, one* people of God. One new humanity.

“Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” – **Colossians 3:11**

“The cross is the place where barriers are destroyed. Before the cross we know our own sin, and we cannot stand there without realizing all of us are without defense and have no claim on God... The ground at the cross is level.”

– Klyne Snodgrass

V. Becoming the New Temple

In verses 19-22, Paul uses a whole bunch of “building” language to describe what God is doing.

In 1 Corinthians 3, we read, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” – **1 Corinthians 3:16**

But it’s interesting: Paul’s language in these final verses of Ephesians 2 is a bit different from what he says in 1 Corinthians.

See, Paul could have just said, “Consequently, because of what Jesus has done, you now are the temple.” But he doesn’t quite say that.

“In him the whole building is joined together and rises [or “grows”] to become a holy temple in the Lord.” – **Ephesians 2:21**

The verb Paul uses here suggests this is a process. This is an ongoing thing that is happening.

It’s like God has a building project. And we are invited to participate in the process (**cf. Ephesians 4:15**).

VI. Active Peacemaking

Jesus is said to be “our peace” in verse 14.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” – **Matthew 5:9**

Not only is Jesus the one who brings peace between groups of people who are divided. He also invites us into a way of life of doing the same. A life of seeking to break down “dividing walls of hostility.”

Our culture and society conditions us to not see the invisible walls that continue to divide people today. Sometimes it takes effort to recognize and see things from another person's perspective. You might need to get curious and ask people about their experiences. Part of peacemaking is seeking understanding of someone else's story.

Life Group Questions

1. What are some examples of “dividing walls of hostility” that you can think of in our world today?
2. Paul speaks of how the Gentiles were once separate and excluded from being a part of God’s people (vs. 11-12). How do you think certain groups of people are excluded in our society today? How are certain groups of people sometimes excluded in our churches today?
3. We, as the church, are the “one new humanity” (v. 15). The gospel has created this *new, multicultural, one* people of God. Do you have friends who are followers of Jesus and who come from different racial/ethnic groups or a different cultural background than your own? What are some things you’ve learned from them? How does the cross unite different groups of people in a way that nothing else can?
4. As you reflect on this text, what are some of the ways you sense it leading you toward being an active peacemaker who seeks to knock down “dividing walls of hostility” in our world today? How might this text lead us toward being people of justice?

Prayer

Pray that the Lord would break down the dividing walls in the world. Pray that He would help us to see the many ways we can be an extension of His love and agents of peace and reconciliation.