

Christ: Our Peace

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

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Madison, Wisconsin
September 14, 2014



Most of us understand that the human race has a long history of building walls. We think of the Great Wall of China, built over a period of more than 2000 years, to try to protect the nation from foreign invaders. We think of the Berlin Wall, built by the East Germans in 1961, in an effort to keep their own people from fleeing from East to West. In our own nation, we think of the various walls and fences along our southern border with Mexico. Closer to home, we think of the walls we have built in our own homes – walls that keep us warm in the winter, walls that protect us from the elements. Many of us with homes also have fences – fences to keep the dogs in and the rabbits out. And speaking of fences, we think of the famous poem by American author, Robert Frost. It is a poem that most of us probably studied in high school. The poem tells the story of two neighbors whose property is separated by a stone wall, and each spring they meet at the wall to walk along and repair it as they go. But, as Robert Frost writes about that process, he wonders why the wall is even there in the first place. With a good sense of humor, he explains that he is not really worried about his neighbor's pine trees and his own apple trees mixing it up with each other – it's not as if he and his neighbor have cows! The neighbor responds, though, with the old saying, "Good fences make good neighbors." The poem then goes on to question that old saying – why do fences make good neighbors? And then he says, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall...."

And although that might be an interesting and sometimes accurate observation, history tells us that this world has had a long history of walls, and trenches, and borders, and fences. This morning, with all of this in mind, I would like for us to continue in our series of lessons from the book of Ephesians, and I would like for us to study a passage in Ephesians 2 where the apostle Paul writes about Jesus, who breaks down one of the most significant barriers or walls in the history of mankind, the dividing wall between God (who is perfect) and those in the human race who have sinned.

In our pew Bibles, the passage in Ephesians 2 is found on page 1828. We studied the first ten verses of this chapter about a year ago, so we won't go back and study those verses again. You might remember, though, that Paul wrote there about the amazing grace of God, "***For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.***" But as we thank God for his amazing grace, Paul tells us that there is something we need to remember. This brings us to the middle of Ephesians 2, starting in verse 11. Notice, please, Ephesians 2:11-22,

¹¹ 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 — ¹² 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. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵ by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. ¹⁷ And 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 our 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 are of God’s household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

This morning, as we focus our thoughts on this inspired paragraph, we realize that these twelve verses have been preserved for us to read today for a reason. And so as we study, I want us to try to get out of this passage what Paul first intended. In this passage, we have a reminder of how things were before we obeyed the good news, we have a reminder concerning what God has done for us, and we also have a reminder concerning what God continues to do.

I. As we study, then, I want us to start where Paul starts, and that is: Paul reminds us that AT ONE TIME WE WERE COMPLETELY SEPARATED FROM GOD.

To really appreciate where we are, sometimes we need to remember where we’ve been. Paul tells us to ***“remember.”*** In verse 11, we find that he is talking to us, the Gentiles in the flesh. As far as I know, all of us here this morning would fall in that category. As far as I know, all of us here today are Gentiles. And so in verse 12 he reminds us that at one time we were ***“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.”***

At one time, we were on the outside. As we touched on very briefly last Sunday, most of us know what it means to be excluded from a group. Paul says that at one time we were in that position. 2000 years ago, the Gentiles were literally excluded from the temple itself. Inside the temple compound, the Jewish leaders had set up a barrier that was intended to keep the Gentiles on the outside. So that you can see it a little better on the illustration up here, I have put a red line parallel to the barrier. This was the wall separating the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Women. Several years ago, I told you about going to a Jewish Museum over in Cleveland, Ohio, not far from where Jordan is going to school. And while we were there, the museum had an exhibit on loan from Israel, and in that exhibit, they had one of the actual warning signs that had been posted on this barrier. The barrier itself was a brick wall about 4-½ feet high, and you can just barely make these out on the illustration, but every few feet a sign was posted, and we now have one of these signs. If it weren’t for the armed guard standing right there beside it, I could have reached out and touched it! It was right there! I would estimate that it was about 2 feet wide by 18 inches tall and about a foot thick. The sign on the exhibit pointed out that archaeologists have examined this piece microscopically, and they have discovered traces of paint. The sign, then, was painted white, and the engraved letters were then painted red.

And again, these signs were posted every few feet. The sign says, "Let no one of any other nation come within the fence and barrier around the Holy Place. Whosoever will be taken doing so will himself be responsible for the fact that his death will ensue." In other words, "If you are a Gentile and we kill you when you cross this barrier, you have only yourself to blame!" In fact, I don't know if we realize this, but you know how I pointed out last week that Paul was under house arrest in Rome as he wrote this letter? Do you remember WHY Paul was under arrest? He was under arrest because of a riot caused by the Jews when they assumed that Paul had taken a Gentile across this boundary at the temple in Jerusalem. He didn't actually do it, but they thought that he did, the crowd started to get out of control, and to save his own life, Paul appealed to the Emperor. Paul knew that he could not get a fair trial in Jerusalem, and so as a Roman citizen, he appealed to Rome. Of all people, then, Paul understood that Gentiles were excluded from the temple.

As Paul writes about the grace of God, then, he wants us as Gentiles to think back to the way things were before we obeyed the gospel. He says, "***You need to appreciate where you have been. At one time, you were 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***" [PARAPHRASED]. At one point we were on the outside.

II. **However, as we continue with verses 13-18, Paul presses forward with a reminder concerning WHAT GOD HAS DONE.**

We were separate, "***But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.***" We were separate, but now "***in Christ***" God has broken down the barrier of the dividing wall. And so, like the passage from Chapter 1 we studied last week, we see an emphasis on being "***in Christ.***" "***In Christ***" we have been brought close to God by the blood of Jesus. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! In Christ, the barrier between God and ourselves has been completely removed.

A number of commentaries on the Bible tell us that the early church probably used verses 13-18 as a song, and as we look at that song, we see the overwhelming message here is that Jesus brought peace through the cross. Through his blood, the barrier of the dividing wall has been completely removed. The only time we take down a wall, the Berlin Wall, for example, is when those on both sides of the wall are at peace with one another. The wall comes down when the two sides have been reconciled, and that is exactly what happens through the cross. Through the cross, the price for our sin is paid. Through the cross, the hostility between God and those "***in Christ***" has come to an end. We think of what happened right at the moment Jesus took his very last breath on the cross. Mark tells us in Mark 15:38 that, "***...the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.***" The veil in the temple was a 4-inch thick woven panel that separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple. In other words, at the exact moment of the Lord's death, that gap was spanned. The price for our sins was paid.

But not only did the barrier between God and us come down, we also find in these verses that the barrier between Jews and Gentiles has come down as well. In verse 14, we find that he "***made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.***" In other words, at the cross, Jesus made all of those warning signs completely irrelevant. And now (according to verse 18), both groups have equal access "***in one Spirit to the Father.***" And again, all of this has been made possible through the blood of Jesus. Jesus is our peace. "***In Christ***" we have been brought near to God, and "***in Christ***" God has broken down the barrier of the dividing wall.

- III. As we go back to the last few verses in this chapter, we find that Paul moves on to **WHAT GOD IS DOING NOW**. In verse 11, it was *“Therefore remember,”* remember the way we were. In verse 13, it was *“But now,”* But now, this is what God has done. And now we get to verse 19, *“So then.”* Because of all of this, therefore, this is what God is doing right now. And in verses 19-22, we have three pictures of what God is doing right now as the church is pictured as a kingdom, as a family, and as a building (or temple). And all three of these pictures point to us as Christians being together, the idea of **UNITY IN THE CHURCH**.

First, though, notice that we are described as *“citizens”* in God’s kingdom. We are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are *“citizens with the saints.”* Here in the United States, many of us appreciate what it means to be citizens. Citizenship has its privileges. Citizenship gives us certain rights and responsibilities. Yes, we have protection under the constitution, but there is also a price to pay. Most of us were born citizens, but for those who became citizens, there is a long process. There is an oath that must be taken before a judge. Do we realize what people have to promise before they are allowed to be citizens of the United States? I want to share the “Oath of Allegiance” required of those wanting to place their citizenship in the United States,

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

Those are some serious promises! Until I went to brother Michael’s citizenship ceremony several years ago, I did not know that new citizens had to promise to bear arms on behalf of the United States. Again, some serious responsibilities! In a similar way, citizenship in God’s kingdom, the church, also brings with it certain rights and responsibilities. We submit to the leadership of Christ as our head, and in return, we come under the spiritual protection of God as our King. As Americans, when we travel overseas, we may feel a little bit uneasy – there is the language barrier, we don’t know what the street signs mean, we don’t know the local laws and customs, but then we come back, the customs agent says, “Welcome home,” and we know we belong here. This is where we have our citizenship. In a similar way, Paul says that in the Lord’s church, we are *“fellow citizens with the saints.”* Do we see the emphasis on unity here? We are *“fellow citizens with the saints.”* As *“fellow citizens,”* we are in this together.

Secondly, Paul moves on to picture the church as a family, and again, we have an emphasis on unity. At the end of verse 19, he refers to us as saints being a part of *“God’s household.”* Last week, if you remember, we talked about being adopted into God’s family. We went from being unloved and unwanted by the world to being loved and accepted by the Lord. We think of what John would go on to write in 1 John 3:1, *“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.”* It is great to be a part of God’s kingdom, but it is so much more amazing to be considered a part of God’s family. Family relationships are some of the closest relationships we have on this earth, so it is interesting, then, that the church is pictured as a family. In the church, we share with each other, we lean on each other for help and support. In so many ways, the church is like an oasis from the world. We come together as a Christian family, and we actually care about each other. There is unity and togetherness in the family.

But then there is a third picture here at the end as we are also pictured not only as God's kingdom, and God's family, but now as God's building. As Christians, as the church, we are God's temple. This building is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets – these are the men who wrote down the inspired word of God, the foundation of the church, with Christ himself being the cornerstone. And notice (in verse 21): This temple is a building that is constantly growing, and it is growing **"together,"** again, another reference to unity. The church itself is a living building, **"fitted together, ... growing into a holy temple in the Lord ... built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."**

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I want to point out something very similar to last week's lesson, and that is: In all of these words, Paul never really tells us to DO anything, does he? I don't see any commands here. Instead, going back to verse 11, he tells us to **"Remember."** There will be plenty of instruction coming a little later in this book. But for now, Paul wants the Christians in Ephesus to remember where they've been. At one time, they were **"...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."** However, in Christ Jesus, they have now been brought near by the blood of Jesus. And in very practical terms, all of this means that they are now UNITED in the church – Jews and Gentiles working together – fellow citizens, members of God's family, being built up into a holy temple in the Lord. And even though we aren't really told to DO anything here, there is great value in simply knowing how good we have it **"in Christ."**

This morning, then, for those of us who are Christians, let us be happy! Let us be thankful for what the Lord has done! We are no longer strangers to God, but we are in the family!

On the other hand, if you have not yet obeyed the gospel, the reminder is: God's invitation is still open. Jesus died for our sins. We obey that good news by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our past sins. If you have any questions, let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. If, however, you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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