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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

No More Strangers
Ephesians 2:11–22
Mark Mitchell
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series: Sit, Walk, Stand: A Journey Through Ephesians

Why do we build walls? Walls in a home provide a barrier to keep out the elements, to ensure privacy, and to hang pictures. But we also build walls out of fear for protection, as a defense against hostile forces.

The Great Wall of China was built to keep out the invading hordes of Genghis Khan and other powerful enemies. It stretches for 4,000 miles over the Chinese frontier. It's stood for over 2,000 years and is a symbol of a peoples' desire to be safe.

In more recent history the Berlin Wall was created to keep people in. East German guards would watch with keen eyes on both sides of the wall making certain no one came in or out. The wall represented suspicion, mistrust and hostility. Many people were killed trying to escape East Germany. West Germans would erect crosses where they fell in open defiance of the East German guards.

Last week my son and I were driving through El Paso, Texas to get him home from college. El Paso is a border town. Separating El Paso from Juarez, Mexico is a rather ugly, tall brown fence. On the other side of the fence is what looks like another world, and not a very inviting one!

Some of the walls we build are invisible and even more difficult to deconstruct than physical walls. We build walls to keep us from relating to certain people who irritate or offend us. We construct lives that keep those who are different out. Many of us don't allow others to see our true selves. We're afraid if people see too much of us they'll have nothing to do with us. So we throw up a wall.

What if I told you Jesus came to destroy walls? His mission was to remove the barriers that keep us from knowing God, knowing each other, and ultimately living in true relationship. In Ephesians 2, Paul describes how Christ breaks down walls. Last week we looked at verses 1–10. We saw how the wall between us and God was torn down. Paul didn't use that language but in essence that's what he said. We were spiritually dead, enslaved and condemned. We were separated, walled off from God. But God saved us. He made us alive together with Christ and he did this not because of anything we did to earn it but out of his love, mercy and grace.

But there's still a problem: not only were we separated from God, but we were alienated from one another. And in the 1st century, when Paul wrote this letter, the most significant wall was the

one that separated Jews from Gentiles. This was an invisible wall that separated them socially to the point they couldn't even eat with one another. But there was also a real wall that surrounded the Jewish Temple. It wasn't lined with machine-gun turrets or barbed wire, but it was no less divisive. It was only about 3 or 4 feet high and made of stone. It divided the outer court of the Temple, known as the Court of the Gentiles, from the inner court. A number of gates were placed into this wall at strategic locations. By each gate, there was posted a sign with a warning in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. It read, "No foreigner may enter... Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." What a great way to welcome visitors!

It might seem to us God himself contributed to this situation. Didn't God choose Israel out of all the nations to be his chosen people? But don't forget God's whole purpose in calling Israel was to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations. But Israel forgot her calling and twisted it into a pretext for pride and prejudice. By the time Paul's day rolled around, the Jews despised Gentiles. They said the Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of Hell. It was against Jewish law to help a Gentile mother in labor because that would help bring another Gentile into the world! If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, they held a funeral for that boy while he was still alive. This was never God's intention. As a matter of fact, we saw back in 1:10 that God's ultimate plan involved *"bringing unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."* That includes the unity of Jew and Gentile. But for that to happen something needed to change. Somehow this enmity or hostility between Jew and Gentile had to be dealt with. Somehow this wall had to come down. That's what Paul describes in verses 11–22.

What We Once Were: Alienated from God's People.

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)—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 (verses 11–12).

He starts by reminding us what we once were. Look at the powerful words used here: separate, excluded, foreigner. All these describe the alienation of Gentiles from the people of God. Even

derogatory names and labels are part of this. We were scornfully called “uncircumcised” by Jewish people. God gave Abraham and his descendants circumcision as an outward sign of the covenant he made with them. But they had exaggerated its importance. What God really cared about was a circumcision of the heart (Dt 10:16). Paul hints at that when he says it was done *“in the body by human hands.”*

But in v. 12 more substantial issues are raised. He says we were *“separate from Christ.”* Jewish people looked forward to the coming of the Christ, but Gentiles didn’t have that expectation. He also says we were *“excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise.”* Israel was a commonwealth or a nation under God. They were a theocracy and a covenant people to whom God had made promises. We weren’t part of that. And so, we were “without hope and without God in the world.” Although God had planned all along to include Gentiles one day, we didn’t know that, so in that sense we were without hope. And we were Godless. It’s not that we didn’t believe in God. The Ephesians had come out of a background where they had all kinds of gods. But Paul is saying we didn’t know and worship the true God.

Whether we knew it or not, this was our condition: separated instead of integrated, excluded instead of included, foreigners instead of friends. We’ve all experienced this. We all want to be a part of **the** group. Every society has people who feel left out, who don’t get picked for the team or invited to the party. We exclude because of pride, fear, ignorance or the desire to feel superior.

I experience this each time I board an airplane. The first-class passengers are served gourmet food on china by their own flight attendants; those of us in coach are lucky to get a bag of pretzels. The first-class passengers have room to stretch and sleep; those of us in coach are squeezed together like sardines. Once the plane takes off, a curtain is drawn. It’s not to be violated. It’s like the veil that walls off the Holy of Holies in the temple at Jerusalem. The curtain reminds us some people are first class and some aren’t. Those who aren’t mustn’t violate the boundary. They can’t even see past it. I was on a flight where for some reason they didn’t fasten the curtain. I felt privileged just to be able to look inside! But the airline wanted us to know we still weren’t allowed to use the facilities in the Holy of Holies, even though they had one restroom for ten people and we had two for several hundred of us!

You see, the curtain stands for a tendency deep inside the fallen human spirit to exclude. In the act of exclusion, we divide the world up into “us” and “them.” Paul wants us to remember we were at one time walled off from God’s people. That’s the command in these verses—remember! It’s the first command to show up in Ephesians. This whole first section isn’t about doing; it’s about sitting and resting in what God has done for us. But

here we’re told to **do** something—remember! Remember what you were. There are some things the Bible tells us to forget, like the wrongs others do to us, but not this. Remember you were Christless, homeless, friendless, hopeless and Godless. Why is it so important to remember? Because it’s only if we remember pain of exclusion we’ll be able to appreciate the grace of God that’s included us.

What He’s Done: Breaking Down the Wall.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He 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 (verses 13–18).

That’s what Paul describes next. Remember last week the two key words were *“But God...”* while here he says *“But now...”* You were alienated, you were excluded, you were strangers, “but now...” He says three things have happened.

He has brought you near

First, you who were far off have been brought near to God. This language of “far and near” was full of meaning for the Jewish people. God had promised to be near to Israel. Moses once said, *“What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?”* By contrast, the Gentile nations were considered “far off.” But now we’ve been brought near to God. When Peter preached his first sermon in Acts 2 he said, *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.... The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off...”* He’s talking about us. We who were far off are brought near.

Notice how this happened. It happened *“in Christ Jesus”* and *“by the blood of Christ.”* For us to be brought near we need to be *“in Christ Jesus,”* which means we need to belong to him; put our faith in him. But this is only possible *“by the blood of Christ.”* Our sin kept us far off, but since he shed his blood on the cross and paid for our sins we can be forgiven and cleansed and brought near to God. So now we can say with the psalmist, *“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good”* (Ps 73:28).

What an amazing privilege we have to be near to God. I was talking to a friend this week and he told me he and his wife are going to have another baby. I said, “Wow, that’s great! When?” He said, “We’re not sure.” I said, “What do you mean, you’re not

sure? It takes about nine months." Then he showed me the picture. It was a little 3-year-old girl from the far off African Congo. They're adopting her, making plans to fly there so they could bring her near. That's what God has done for us. He sent Jesus on a long trip from heaven to earth to claim us as his own and bring us near the Father.

He established peace by setting aside the law

But that's not all. Not only did he bring us near to God, he also brought us near to one another. He says *"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one..."* Jesus is the peacemaker. He not only made peace between us and God but between Jew and Gentile. *"He came and preached peace..."* not only to those who were near but also to those who were far away. He did this by destroying the wall of hostility that separated us. This is amazing because as Paul wrote this the wall around the temple still stood. It wouldn't be destroyed until 70 A.D. when Roman legions entered Jerusalem and tore it down. So it was still standing, still keeping Gentiles out. But Paul says Jesus destroyed it; he destroyed what it represented.

How did he do this? Verse 15 says he did by *"by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations."* Somehow, through "his flesh" (his death), Jesus set aside the law. But wait a minute, didn't Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it? So what does this mean?

It's important to realize the law had two parts: the moral law and the ceremonial law. The moral law is the 10 Commandments, which can be boiled down to love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus was talking about the moral law in the Sermon on the Mount, which is still relevant, but here Paul is talking about just the ceremonial law. This includes all the animal sacrifices, the dietary regulations, the festivals and all the rules about "clean" and "unclean." Those things erected a serious barrier between Jew and Gentile. But those things were always designed as a shadow, the reality of which is Christ. Jesus fulfilled all those things and they're no longer relevant. And he did it not just for Jews but for Gentiles. So the wall of the ceremonial law has fallen.

Another thing Paul may have in mind is that although Jesus didn't abolish the moral law as a standard of behavior, he did abolish it as a way of salvation. The bottom line is we can't obey the law perfectly no matter how hard we try. So the law always condemns us. But Jesus came and obeyed it perfectly and he died to bear the consequences of our disobedience. So Jesus abolished both the regulations of the ceremonial law and the condemnation of the moral law. Both were divisive. Both were put aside by the cross.

He created a new humanity with access to God

The result is, as he says here, he created *"one new humanity out of the two."* The human race is no longer divided between Jew

and Gentile; the spiritual "haves and have nots." And this unity spans more than just the Jew-Gentile divide. It includes gender divisions, social divisions, racial divisions, tribal divisions. In Col. 3:11 Paul says, *"Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."* This doesn't mean we don't retain our differences, but rather that our inequality before God is abolished and our differences no longer need divide us. Verse 18 tells us in Christ we all enjoy the most amazing privilege: *"For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."* There's the equal access to God. The curtain walling off the Holy of Holies has been torn in two. Through Jesus we can all barge right in with full access to the Father.

In all of this, there's a very profound psychological insight. The strength of any hostility is self-righteousness. One group feels they're superior to the other. The Jews felt superior because they had the law and with that they could judge others for not keeping it. But that's been set aside. We're all on the same level. We all need grace and forgiveness. We all need the cross. We all have the same access to the Father through Jesus. So you put us on the same level and you remove the hostility. It's like Jesus with the woman caught in adultery. Everyone wanted to stone her because she was such a sinner. But then Jesus says, "Those of you who are without sin, go ahead and throw the first stone." I love how it says starting with the oldest, they walked away. The older you get, the more you understand what a sinner you are.

But this provides a crucial insight to our unity and the quality of our relationships. There's no place for self-righteous judgment in the body of Christ. We were all beggars looking for our next meal. God found us and fed us and brought us home and made us a part of his family. And there are no favorites in his family. We're all loved the same. You don't have to try to be someone you're not. You don't have to hide your faults and mistakes. You can be real because we're all in the same boat. Imagine what a difference that would make just in your marriage if you really practiced it. It's only when a husband or wife sees themselves as able to be wrong, needing forgiveness as well as granting forgiveness that there can be unity and intimacy. The same principle works between parents and children and relationships here.

What We've Become: A New Society.

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 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 (verses 19–22).

We've seen what we were and what he's done. In the last few verses we see more of what we've become. He starts out and says "*Consequently...*" So here's the result of the tearing down of this wall of hostility. He already told us he created one new humanity out of the two, but now he describes what we've become collectively in greater detail. He uses three images.

God's kingdom

First, we're fellow citizens. We were "*excluded from citizenship in Israel*" but now we're "*fellow citizens with God's people*." Our citizenship isn't on earth but in God's kingdom. God's kingdom isn't a place but rather a realm; it's God himself ruling his people and bestowing on us all the rights and privileges his rule implies.

I'm traveling to Cameroon this summer and I've been in the process of getting a visa. They make it very clear that while I'm there I'm a guest in their country. I really have few rights. Not so with us in God's kingdom. We're not living on a passport or a visa; we have our birth certificates; we belong there.

God's family

Second, we're "*members of his household*." So we move from a kingdom to a family or household. We have a common Father. We're brothers and sisters. There's a bond there.

I have one brother. We've not lived near each other for 40 years. We have different jobs; different families; very different personalities. As kids we fought like cats and dogs. As adults we've gone a few rounds as well. But he's my brother. There's a bond we have that's practically impossible to break. There's a willingness to be there for one another that's unlike almost any other relationship. This is the bond we have as brothers and sisters in Christ.

God's temple

Finally, we're part of a building. Not just any old building, but God's temple. We already talked about the old temple with its wall; this new temple is different. The foundation is the apostles and prophets. They're the ones who gave us the Scriptures. The church is built on the authority of those writings and they don't change just as the foundation of a building shouldn't have to change. The cornerstone is Jesus Christ. It's essential to the foundation because it holds it steady and it keeps it in line. The temple in Jerusalem had massive cornerstones almost 39 feet long! As our strong cornerstone, Jesus is the key to our unity and our growth. He says "*in him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple. And in him you too (Gentiles) are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit*." Notice there is growth and change in this. We

as a church are growing; that's part of why we started a North campus and soon a South campus. With growth comes change. Sometimes we don't like change, but if you're not changing, you're not growing; and if you're not growing, you're dead!

What's the purpose of this new temple? The same as the purpose of the old: to be a dwelling place of God. Have you ever considered that? As we meet here on Sundays—a group of us in Foster City and another group in San Bruno; as we meet in our small groups during the week up and down the Peninsula—what are we trying to do? What are we? We're the dwelling place of God. We're the manifestation of his glory, just as the temple in Jerusalem was designed to be. If people are going to come to know God they'll have to see him in our life together.

This is why it's so important that when the world looks at us they see us living out the unity described in this passage. They need to see the walls of pride and self-righteousness come down. They need to see the walls of racism and division of rich and poor come down. They need to see walls of jealousy and resentment being smashed and unforgiving spirits being released. They need to see walls of denominationalism and clericalism come down. They need to see different churches working together to reach the lost rather than competing over the found.

On a summer day in 1987, President Reagan stepped up to a Berlin podium and publicly challenged Mikhail Gorbachev. He said, "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" And they did it. Two years later, that mass of barbed wire, concrete and stone fell.

Jesus has torn down the wall that separated humanity. But some of us are still living behind a wall of our own making. As you leave today, ask yourself, "Am I willing to tear down those walls? What will it take for me to do that?" Let me close with a quote from John Stott: "I wonder if anything is more urgent today for the honor of Christ and the spread of the gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is—a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as Peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due his name."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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