

Breaking Down Barriers

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[0 : 00] And I encourage you to take the few Bibles and open them at page 181 towards the end in the New Testament section. We're continuing a sermon series on St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

This is the fourth week of it and we're looking at the second half of Ephesians chapter 2, which was the first reading this morning. Before I begin to preach, I shall pray for us.

O God, your word is life and we pray that your word will take root in our lives now and bring us life in and through Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen.

You don't need me to tell you that humanity is divided. It's divided between rich and poor, between white and black, between liberal and labour, between young and old, between upper class and lower class, between male and female, etc., etc. Divisions running all through our society.

In St. Paul's time, the basic division was between Jew and Gentile. Gentile was a person who was not a Jew. And that was the basic division in his society and in the world in which he lived. And at one level, the Old Testament seems to support such a division.

[1 : 22] That the Jews and the Jews alone were the chosen people of God. Certainly, though, the Old Testament recognises that the choice of Israel as God's people had as an ultimate purpose the salvation of the world through the Jews.

But certainly in Paul's day, much of that was lost. So, in the time of St. Paul and in the time of Jesus as well, the following sorts of things would be true. As one person wrote, the Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile.

The Gentiles said the Jews were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he made. It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world.

The barrier between Jew and Gentile was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or vice versa, then a funeral service would be held for that Jewish boy or Jewish girl.

Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death. Well, that's not very friendly, is it? But that shows the sort of division in society that was there in Paul's day, and that is the background for the passage in Ephesians 2 that we're looking at this morning.

[2 : 37] Paul, in writing to the Ephesian church, is writing to a church that's predominantly a Gentile Christian church. That is, people who are not Jews, who've become Christians. No doubt some of them were Jewish Christians, that is, Jews who've placed their faith in Jesus Christ, but predominantly a Gentile church, and to which Paul is writing.

As we saw last week, these are Christians who, he stressed, have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and his death on the cross for them. And arising out of that, Paul continues in this passage.

He begins it with, therefore, showing that what he's saying now arises out of the fact that they're saved by grace through faith. And the passage that we look at divides into three. Verses 11 and 12 looks at what the Gentiles were before they were Christians.

The middle section, verses 13 to 18, discusses what Jesus has done and the implications of that. And then verses 19 to 22 at the end says, so then this is what you now are.

So what you were, verses 11 and 12, what Christ has done, 13 to 18, and what you now are in response to that, verses 19 to 22. What you once were then, verses 11 and 12.

[3 : 48] Paul says, Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands. All that looks a bit convoluted, but really what he's saying there is that the basic division was Jew and Gentile.

And symbolically and physically that distinction was marked by physical circumcision. For Jews were told to be circumcised, and Gentiles by and large were not. The Jews were told to be circumcised way back at the life of Abraham in about 2000 BC.

It was to be a mark of them being the chosen people of God. And Abraham and all his male descendants after him were to be physically circumcised as a mark of belonging to God's people.

And when Paul says in verse 11 that the Gentiles are called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, there's a sense of derogativeness about that, that the Jews would look down on the Gentiles who are the uncircumcised in their society.

Paul then goes on in the next verse, 12, to say five things that the Gentiles, before they were Christians, were lacking. They were separate from Christ, separated from him, cut off from him, had no relationship to him, firstly.

[5 : 04] Secondly, they were alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel. Not thinking of Commonwealth in terms of the English or British Commonwealth, but really the better word is citizenship.

That is, they were not members of the citizenship of Israel, that is God's people. Though there were Gentiles who lived in Palestine, they were not citizens of the people of God.

So they were cut off from citizenship of God's people. Thirdly, in the same verse, Paul says that Gentile Christians were, in the past, strangers to the covenants of promise.

In the Old Testament, God had established a number of covenants, in a sense, treaty relationships, with his people. He did so with Abraham in Genesis 12 to 17, established a covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

In Exodus, he did the same with Moses at Mount Sinai, and with all of Israel in the same event. With King David in 2 Samuel 7, the same sort of thing. God establishing a covenant relationship, in a sense, pledging himself to his people for their future.

[6 : 14] Some of those covenants required some sort of response of Israel, in response to what God had done in establishing these covenants. But when Paul says here, strangers of the covenants of promise, promise singular, he really has them all together in mind, and perhaps originating with the promise to Abraham.

That Abraham, though he was old, and his wife was barren, and they were childless, nonetheless, from them would come a strong nation, in which kings would be born, and through that nation, the world would ultimately be blessed.

But they were promised, that was a promise, made to Abraham, and his racial descendants, the Jews, as they came to be called. And the Gentiles were strangers to that, not part of that.

The promise was not made to them. The fourth thing about these people, were that they did not have hope, in the same verse 12. Of course, they probably were people, who hoped for the future, in some respect.

It's not saying that they were, clinically depressed, or anything like that. Rather, what Paul is saying, is that they had no real hope, because as he goes on to say, they were without God.

- [7 : 24] It's an almost ironic statement, to say that the Ephesian Gentile Christians, in the past, had been without God. For the town, or city of Ephesus, like many of the major cities, of the Greco-Roman world, of Paul's day, were inundated with gods.

At every turn, there would be a statue, of some god. You can walk down, the ruined streets of Ephesus today, and though you don't see, many if any, of the original statues, of the gods, you can see the plinths, and the platforms, where they would have been.

There are some replicas as well. And if you go to the nearby town of Selchuk, you can see in the Ephesus Museum, some of the statues of the gods, that have been found, in the excavations of Ephesus.

Nearby Ephesus, was the great temple of Artemis, or Diana. One of the seven wonders of the world, this temple, and in its heart, was a statue, of Artemis or Diana, in the middle of it.

There's barely anything left, of that temple now. But so, for Paul to say, that these were people, who were without God, is a striking statement. For everywhere they went, they had their gods around them.

- [8 : 31] But Paul is saying, that though you've got, all these statues in effect, it's not God. They're not gods. They're just lumps of stone, or metal. You're without the one, true living God.

And therefore, without hope, in the world. One could summarise this, as one commentator has done, by saying that these people, were Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and godless.

That's what you once were, Paul is saying. But now, in Christ, verse 13. Last week, if you remember, Paul said that, those who were not Christians, were dead.

But in verse 4, he said, but God, has done something, and now the same sort of, contrast occurs. You were all, lacking all these things, but now, in Christ.

Verse 13. What has Christ done? We might summarise it, by saying, Christ has brought, peace. Not peace, as we think of it, which is, the absence of warfare.

- [9 : 33] We have a very, low view, of what peace is about, really. We just think, it's the absence of warfare. As though a ceasefire, means peace. But Paul has got, a Jewish heritage, here, and the idea of peace, is much more positive, much more rich, and much deeper, than a sort of, mere absence, of warfare.

For Paul, peace was, the Jewish word, shalom, well-being, harmony, goodness, between people, a positive attitude, and relationship, between people. Not just a standoff, not just a ceasefire.

And that's the peace, that Jesus has brought, he says. And it's a word, that occurs a number, of times here. Verse 14 begins, for Jesus, is our peace. Verse 15 ends, that Jesus is creating, in himself, one new man, in the place of the two, so making peace.

And then in verse 17, Jesus came, and preached, peace to you, who are far off, and peace to you, who are near. So peace, is in a sense, the key idea, in what Jesus has done.

Now he, Jesus hasn't just come, and said, oh look, you've got to get on, with each other. He's done something, much more radical, than that. The peace that Jesus brings, is two dimensional peace.

- [10 : 48] It is peace, between Jew and Gentile, horizontal if you like, between people, but it's also peace, between people, and God, a vertical dimension, to peace.

Well let's see, what Paul says, about this peace. Verse 13, but now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once, far off, that's the Gentiles, have been brought near, in the blood of Christ.

There's a conception, underlying this, that the Gentiles are far off, and the Jews are near. So to say, that those who are far off, have been brought near, suggests now, some sort of, unity or harmony, between Jew, and Gentile.

Something that he goes on, to make more explicit, in the next verse. For Jesus is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down, the dividing wall, of hostility. That is between Jew, and Gentile.

The imagery, that Paul is using here, of far off, and near, and of a dividing wall, of hostility, probably derives, from the temple, in Jerusalem, that stood at the time.

[11 : 58] The temple, was built in a thousand, or about 950 BC, by Solomon, destroyed in 580, by the Babylonians, rebuilt in 520, by the Israelites, and it stood.

It was refurbished, by Herod the Great, just before Jesus, was born, and it was eventually, destroyed in 70 AD, by the Romans, well after Jesus' death, and Paul's execution. That temple, was the location, of God's dwelling, with his people.

But though, that were the case, it actually was, highly structured, and divided. At its centre, was the holy place, the holy of holies. A little chamber really, three walls, and down 19 steps, behind a large, thick wall, that was where the Gentiles, were allowed to go.

Down, and away, and one could say, far off. There was a, an inscription, on the wall, that separated, the court of the Gentiles, from where the Israelite, women and men, could go.

We, well not we, but archaeologists, found one of these inscriptions, 120 years ago. And it said, no foreigner, may enter within the barrier, and enclosure, around the temple.

[13 : 11] Anyone caught doing so, will have himself to blame, for his ensuing death. It's not a very friendly way, to invite people to church, is it? But that shows, the depth of hostility, between Jew, and Gentile.

The division. Gentiles far off, far away from the Holy of Holies, in the centre. And then in various gradations, Israelites, coming towards the, holy place, in the middle.

But Paul is saying, that Jesus' death, has broken down, the dividing wall, of hostility. Not physically, because it still stood, at this time, it lasted till 70 AD. But spiritually, it was broken, on the first, good Friday.

Paul is saying, that in Jesus' death, there is now, some unity, and peace, between Jew, and Gentile. The two groups, that were so opposed, to each other, and so despised, each other. Jesus has broken, that down, and Paul says, in verse 14, made us, both one.

Verse 15, he goes on, to elaborate, it a little bit further. He's done this, by abolishing, in his flesh, that is, I presume, in his death, on the cross, the law, of commandments, and ordinances.

[14 : 23] Not, in a sense, the Israelite law, the Old Testament law, had as part of it, a separation, that Israel would be distinct, from other nations. So, Paul is saying, that Jesus has, put that aside, that no longer, is there a law, that separates Israel, from Gentiles.

It's put aside, through Jesus' death, on the cross. And he goes on, to say in verse 15, making in himself, one new man, or person, in himself.

But we need to note here, something important. Paul is not just, talking about, the Gentiles, becoming Jews. He's not saying, that Gentiles now, are treated like Jews, or that Gentiles, can enter the courts, of the Jews, in the temple.

He's not saying, that the Jews, have got it right, all along. For he's actually saying, that the Old Testament law, which established, who the Jews were, has itself, been put aside. He's not saying, that the one new man, that Jesus creates, is really just Jews.

He's saying, that Jews, and Gentiles, are now one new man, that transcends, Jew and Gentile. So when somebody, addressed the men's group, earlier this week, and suggested, that Christians, should have, a much richer appreciation, of our Jewish background, and thought, that the Jews, did not need to hear the gospel, I'm afraid he was wrong.

[15 : 45] And this passage, is just one of many, many in the New Testament, that show that. Paul was a Jew, he ought to know. He is saying here, that Jews, and Gentiles, need both, in a sense, to come to something different, and something new.

And that becomes clear, when we see the vertical dimension, of the peace, that Jesus brings. A horizontal dimension, that brings Jew, and Gentile together, but now a vertical dimension, not only that brings, Gentile, and God together, but that brings, Jew, and God together, as well.

Verse 16, makes it clear, that Jesus might reconcile, us both, Jew and Gentile, not just Gentile, Jew and Gentile, both, to God, in one body, not by two bodies, not by two means, as though Jews, can come to God, through one way, and Gentiles, through Jesus, no not at all, but both, Jew and Gentile, together, through Jesus' death, on the cross, might be reconciled, to God, thereby bringing, the hostility, to an end.

You see, Jesus is not just, talking about happy families, he's not saying, patch up your differences, and get on with each other, he's actually doing, something radical, at the heart, of who these people were, and it's therefore, through his death, on the cross, that he can actually, bring peace, between Jew and Gentile, peace between Jew and Gentile, only occurs, when there is peace, with them, and God, in a sense, Jew, Gentile and God, come together, in peace, there can't be peace, horizontally, without the vertical, dimension, of peace, that Jesus brings, and it comes, through his death, on the cross, verse 17, Jesus came and preached, peace to you, who are far off, to Gentiles, and to you, who are near, because they needed, to hear the peace, that Jesus' death, would bring, Jews were not okay, they needed Jesus, as much as the Gentiles, and this announcement, of peace, is really a statement, of saying, what Jesus' death, brings for them, and then in verse 18, again the same thing, is made clear, for through him, through Jesus, we both,

Jew and Gentile, have access, in one spirit, to the Father, and here perhaps, is the clearest expression, of the deficiency, of the Old Testament, Israelite, or Jew, Gentiles were far off, and Jews were near, near, but they weren't, near enough, Paul is saying, in verse 18, that now in Christ, you don't have nearness, you have access, that's better, that's more intimate, that's closer, than nearness, in a sense, he's saying, that Jesus' death, has brought the Gentiles, who are far off, and the Jews, who are near, both right, into the presence, of God, far closer, than any Israelites, or Jews, were in the past, in January, I was in Istanbul, and went to the, Topkapi Palace, the Grand Sultan's Palace, in Old Istanbul, one of the most, magnificent buildings,

[18 : 47] I've ever been in, full of enormous, treasure, and gold, and emeralds, and all these sorts of things, including, they claim, John the Baptist's hand, it was a bit hard, to really believe that, but in this area, was the harem, all these rooms, where the wives, and the wives' children, and the eunuchs, and the family, of the Sultan, would be kept, it was in the palace, so it was near, to where the Sultan was, but most Sultans, were rather paranoid, about coups against them, especially from brothers, and sons, and grandchildren, so all their family, were kept, in close proximity, but sometimes, never saw, the Sultan, they were kept, in their own little rooms, in the harem, near, but without access, only if the Sultan, wanted to, would they have access, to him, and that's the sort of pattern here, Jews were near, but without access, Gentiles were far off, and they didn't have access, access to God, comes through Jesus' death, and so for those, who are Christians, as I trust, that most of us here are, we have access to God, we can walk, into God's presence, at any time, by right, not because of anything, in us, but because Jesus died for us, opening the way, to access to God, you don't need me, to give you access to God, you don't need a church service, to give you access to God, you don't need a building, to give you access to God, you don't need a formula, to give you access to God, you don't need, sort of, a certain state, of moral purity, to give you access to God,

Jesus' death, has given you access to God, any time, any place, in your life, and what a great thing that is, better than nearness, access, to the Father God, so then, Paul concludes, in verses 19 to 22, from being separate, from Christ, in verse 12, now you are in Christ, in verse 13, 21, 22, from being aliens, to the citizenship, of God's people, now you are fellow citizens, with the saints, in verse 19, from being strangers, to the promise, he says, you're no longer strangers, and sojourners, in verse 19, from being without hope, in verse 12, there's hope of holiness, in verse 21, from being without God, in verse 12, now you belong, to the household of God, in verse 19, something even more intimate, than being a citizen, belonging to the very family, of God, and not only that, you were without God, but now you are indwelt, by God, he lives in you, in verse 22, in the Old Testament temple, the structure, indicated division, division between God, the high priest, the priests, the men, the women, and the Gentiles, division between, all these sorts of groups, but not so, in the temple imagery, that now Paul concludes, this passage with, in verse 20, he says, that the church,

Jew and Gentile, who are Christian, are really, a new temple, in Christ, so verse 20, he says, that it's built upon, the foundation, of the apostles, and the prophets, that is their teaching, that is the New Testament, as we know it today, that is the basis, in a sense, for the building, of the New Testament church, or the New Testament temple, in inverted commas, built on that foundation, Christ Jesus himself, being its cornerstone, some dispute, about this word, it could be the stone, that caps the building off, the one that finishes it, but more likely, it's the first stone, the foundation stone, not as a ceremonial foundation stone, that is unveiled, by a bishop, or an archbishop, or somebody, but the stone, that begins the building, by which the alignment, of the other walls, and so on, is taken, that's Jesus, in the church, he is the most important thing, the one through which, everything else, takes its alignment, that's what Paul means there, but this is not just, a brick and mortar type building,

Paul makes it clear, he's confusing, deliberately, building imagery, with biological imagery, because this is a building, that lives, so he goes on in verse 21, in Christ, the whole structure, is joined together, and grows into a holy temple, in the Lord, it's a living building, it's a living temple, growing in holiness together, and as he says in verse 22, built, we are built into it, for a dwelling place of God, in the spirit, in Ephesus, there was a temple to Artemis, their God, in Jerusalem, there was a temple, to the Jewish God, two temples, one pagan, one Jewish, both were designed, as residences for God, but Paul is in effect, saying here, that both of them, are empty, of the one true living God, for that God, does not live in buildings, made of stone, but he lives in people, being built together, as the church, or the body of Christ,

God does not live in this building, or the old church behind me, any more than in any other building really, but he lives in us, and when we gather as God's people, on a Sunday, to worship him, God is present with us, not because we're in this building, or that building, or any other building, he's present with us, because we are here, where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I, in the midst of you, for in the New Testament, there's no longer any holy place, as there was in the Old Testament, for now it's holy people, that's the temple, of the living God, well let me conclude, with three brief points, firstly this passage, makes it clear, that the corporate nature, of Christianity, is essential, being a Christian, necessitates, belonging to the people of God, there is no solo Christianity, in the Bible at all, corporate involvement, and fellowship, is not an optional extra, for the Christian, coming as passive spectators, to worship, is not what being a Christian, is about, rather active participation, and belonging, to the people of God,

[25 : 00] Sunday by Sunday, week in, week out, not when you feel like it, but every week, that's what God requires, of his people, that's at the essence, of being a Christian, Paul is not saying here, that for some Christians, they sort of get caught up, into church, he's saying that, if you're a Christian, then you are being built together, as a holy temple, actively, growing, living, learning, worshipping, becoming more holy, in living, and so on, it's a corporate state of affairs, and it's of the essence, of being a Christian, not as an added extra, not as an optional extra, so when people say to me, oh well you don't have to go to church, to be a Christian, there's one sense, in which that's true, because we're saved, by grace through faith, but being a Christian, will mean going to church, being part of God's people, actively, not passively, giving as well as receiving, we don't come when we just feel like it, that's a selfish attitude, we come whenever we, you know, every Sunday, in order to give to others, of our Christian fellowship, as well as to receive, for we come to give, as well as receive,

Sunday by Sunday, as a church, midweek groups, are not a substitute for this, Bible studies, tennis clubs, are not a substitute, there is no substitute, for God's people, actively gathering together, week by week, to live, to learn, to have fellowship, to grow, in holiness and love, and so on, secondly, that the church is constituted, and functions, in relation to Christ, it's not just a human organisation, it's not just a social group, but rather, it takes its life, and breath, from Jesus Christ, its cornerstone, notice how, again, as we've done each week, everything that happens, here, happens in Christ, in verse 13, but now, in Christ Jesus, you have become Christians, in effect, Paul goes on to say, at the end of the verse, you've been brought near, in the blood of Christ, not in any other way, but in Jesus' death, then beginning of verse 14, for Jesus is our peace, who's made us both one, nobody else has done that,

Jesus has done that, verse 15 begins, Jesus that has abolished, in his flesh, in his flesh, in his body that is, in his death on the cross, the law of commandments, and ordinances, that he might create, in himself, one new man, then in verse 18, for through him, we both have access, in one spirit to the father, not through anything else, but through Jesus, we both have access, to the father, verse 21, in Jesus, the whole structure, is joined together, verse 22, in Jesus, you also are being built into it, for a dwelling place, of God, in the spirit, everything about the church, fundamentally, revolves around, Jesus Christ, he is its cornerstone, its *raison d'être*, and finally, humanity, is divided, as I said at the beginning, and it always will be, but in the end, there is only one, important division, in humanity, it's not a racial one, it's not a generational one, it's not an economic one, or a political one, it's not one to do with class, or sex, or even religious tradition, the division that counts, is in Christ, or not in Christ, that is the division, in Christ, or not in Christ,

Christ, and this is very important, to grasp, we as Christians here, are united, by and in, the gospel of God's grace, in Jesus death, on the cross for us, that is a given, non-negotiable core, of the church, and of this church, of Holy Trinity, therefore, if we are Christian people, we are united, in Christ, whatever else we think, whatever else we've done, in the past, whatever else we do, we are united, in Jesus Christ, as Christian people, that is a given, that is a fruit, of Jesus death, on the cross, but the corollary of that, is that, all other issues, are of secondary importance, the gospel, is of primary importance, but all other issues, are of secondary importance, and on many of them, there is room to differ, difference of opinion, on secondary issues, is in fact a diversity, not a division, and it's important, to get the perspective right, because there are many, secondary issues, which are very dear, to our hearts, about how the church, should be run, or what we should do, and so on and so forth, but if they're secondary issues, they're not primary, gospel issues, and our unity, takes precedence, over our difference, of opinion, that's diversity, there is room, to disagree there, but on the central issues, there is no room, to disagree, it's important, to get the distinction right, because it helps us, when we cope, with disagreement, for when we disagree, on secondary issues, as no doubt, we will do, and no doubt, you have done in the past, we must recognize, that there's secondary issues, and there is room, for disagreement, there is in fact, diversity, but there is no room, for disagreement, on the central issue, of the gospel, of Jesus Christ, on that, if we are Christians, we are united, and if we are involved, in church leadership, in this church, then we will be Christians, united on that issue, and any attempts, to undermine, the central core, of the gospel, in this church, will not be tolerated, for that is a high offense, to God, there is room, for diversity, there is room, for difference of opinion, on secondary issues, and indeed, in many times, in many places, diversity brings, a great richness, in fellowship, but on the central issues, let me make it clear, there is no room, for maneuver, we are united, in Christ, and in his death, and we will not, negotiate that, it's a given fact, if we're Christian people, and anyone, who seeks to undermine that, is actually denying, the death of Jesus, on the cross, for us, and this church, will not accept, attempts, at such division, but let us give thanks, to God, that we're united, in Christ, let us give thanks, that Jesus death, has brought us peace, with each other, and with God, has brought us, a richer peace, than the United Nations, can ever bring, a richer peace, than any other, person can bring, for Jesus death, has come to the root, of who we are, as people, and brought us together, in him, for eternity, let's pray, our Lord,

Jesus Christ, we worship you, as our Lord, and Savior, and we give you, thanks for your death, for us, for reconciling us, to God, and to each other, and we pray, and we pray, that we, at Holy Trinity, may enjoy, and practice, and strengthen, the unity, which is ours already, through Jesus death, we pray, that we will be united, about the gospel, united, for Jesus, in all that we do, that we may bring him, glory, and honor, on the last day, Amen.