

Ephesians 2:13-22

Theme: Brought near, made one, and built together in Jesus

Can you imagine living in Berlin when, all of a sudden, a tall wall was built through the middle of town? This didn't produce a comforting feeling like being within the cozy walls of your home on a cold day. This wall wasn't built to reduce interstate noise in the neighborhood or prevent coastal erosion. For 28 years, the wall existed to clearly say, "You stay here. They stay there," with deadly consequence for unsanctioned crossing. People who stood on opposite sides of the wall weren't all that far apart physically, yet the other side was impossibly far away because of the wall. This is something that in a very literal way, not many of us can relate to, yet we're often surrounded by walls of our own manufacture.

We build walls around sports allegiance of all things, race, politics, class, education, immigration status, culture, church tradition, even our understanding of who and what a "good Christian" is. What's interesting about these walls is that when we build them we're not always thinking about keeping people out in a hateful way, but that something important is being protected for important reasons only for hate to end up holding that wall up over time. Most people don't think, "How can I be hateful toward someone today?" much like, I gotta imagine, the Ephesian Jewish Christians weren't sitting around thinking, "How can we be hateful toward the Gentiles today?" They had reasons for making this distinction and separating! They had Scripture, the promises, the Law of Moses, the covenants, and centuries of identity wrapped around them. The result? Hostility because loveless standoffishness, arrogance, and religious hypocrisy were things holding up that wall. Then Jesus comes along and says, "The wall you thought protected the holiness of God's people is the very wall I've come to tear down."

The divide and distance between these two groups in Ephesus was real and Paul uses spatial language to show that saying the Gentiles were without Christ, alienated, strangers, without hope, without God! The Jews had every reason, historically and religiously, to see themselves as different. Then Paul says, "*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*" **Ephesians 2:13.** "So we're the same?!" Yes! The people who were far away weren't the only ones who needed Jesus. The people who considered themselves as near needed him too! At the top of the chapter Paul made clear that all of the Ephesian Christians were at one time dead in their sins. All of them! See what Paul's doing? He's dismantling the bogus distinction between people who really need Jesus and people who think they're already kinda good enough for him.

Everyone needs Jesus and Jesus is for everyone. Jesus is peace for everyone. How? He makes people one by smashing down and destroying the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between people, "*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.*" **Ephesians 2:15.** The very Law God gave Israel had become a major part of the wall separating Jew and Gentile. Jesus destroyed it by keeping it, not ignoring it. Jesus said, "I have come to do your will," and fulfilled the Law perfectly, fulfilled the covenant, fulfilled God's righteous demands, and Jesus took the curse of the Law into himself. Jesus died. Jesus took up life again as the receipt of a life lived perfectly before God. Because of Jesus, the Law simply cannot function as the wall that determines who gets to come near to God because all have broken it, yet all are forgiven in Christ. **Ephesians 2:16,** "*And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*" The sins we do against God that keep us away from him are gone. Nothing's separating us from God, we're close to him. The sins we do against each other that push us away from each other are gone. Nothing's separating us from each other. Hostility is put to death in Jesus.

We love the idea that Jesus tears down walls until he tears down the ones we've built. We have such an ingrained instinct to determine who's in and who's out, who's good and who's bad. This can be easily observed in cafeterias in elementary schools and adult workplaces. "Who don't I want to sit next to?" Now, we may never take this thought all the way to, "That person doesn't deserve Jesus," but we often slip into thinking and acting like Jesus is a little bit more for people like us because some people need to get their act together a little bit before they start coming around here. Jesus welcomes and is for everyone and there is nobody at all who comes to Jesus being at all deserving of him. Everyone's on the same level. Jew or Gentile, person who's far or near, member or non-member, well-respected sinner or spectacularly shunned sinner, the person who's been coming to church for 70 years or who walked into one for the first time last week. Everyone has the same need for Jesus and Jesus gave himself for everyone. *"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."* **Ephesians 2:17-18.** The far are near, the two are made one, the dividing wall of law, sin, and hostility is dead, and access to the Father is given to all who are in Jesus by faith from the one Spirit.

What's that mean for you? Paul's glad you asked, *"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."* **Ephesians 2:19-20.** Paul is using spatial language to show closeness. No longer foreigners, but fellow citizens of Jesus' heavenly kingdom with all the blessings and purpose and meaning that goes along with it. No longer strangers, but members of God's family and house permanently fixed into it alongside Christ, the cornerstone, through faith in him from the words of prophets and apostles. Jesus brings in. Jesus gives true belonging.

Belonging is good. Have you ever had the feeling you didn't belong? Felt out of place? That can be an uncomfortable, isolating experience. Maybe it's a new school, team, church, or job. Maybe you're at a gathering where you hardly know anybody in a room full of people who seem to know each other. Then, someone sees you awkwardly milling about and hollers, "Hey! We've got a spot here. Come sit with us!" Things change then, don't they? The room's no longer intimidating, but welcoming even though you didn't suddenly become more interesting or worthy of invitation. Someone looked outside themselves and made room for you. That's gospel invitation, welcome, and oneness. Very practically speaking, it's a, "You can sit here with us because this is your home, too," mentality. Do that for someone. Smash through walls, break down divisions with Jesus' love even if – especially if – the person is as "different" from you as could be however you define it.

The house of God, all the people that make it up, are being continually built together as the dwelling place of God. What's it say about the person in whom God lives? That they are forgiven, holy. Eternally, it means life in heaven with God. Right now, it means power to live a life of love. Jesus went to the cross to save the world by grace and to empower all who believe to do the good works he prepared in advance for them to do. It's these very works, bafflingly enough, God mysteriously works through to reveal the excellence of the gospel: that Christ himself is our peace with God and with each other, whoever they are, wherever they're from, no matter how far away. Amen.