

## Can These Walls Tumble Down Too?

8<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 07/18/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 14, **“For [Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility”**

### **Introduction**

- ✘ From Old Testament times, God has shown that even the thickest, most formidable stone walls are no match to His almighty power. You might remember, for example, soon after the people of Israel had entered into the Promised Land, that their first conquest against the residing pagans was at the city of Jericho.
  - ➔ It was only by God and His power – not by any human hands or manmade weapons – that the walls of Jericho, as the old-time spiritual likes to put it, “Came a’Tumbling Down”.
  - ➔ Hebrews 11:30 refers to that incident and says, “By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after [the city] had been encircled for seven days”.
- ✘ Yes the truth that Jesus proclaimed in Mark 10:27 was just as true in the Old Testament, as it was in His day when He talked with His disciples about the “walls” that mankind and the church throughout history have constructed to divide groups of people one from another and especially between ourselves and God’s way into eternal salvation. How are those walls torn down? Jesus said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”
  - ➔ And now, Paul addresses those walls of separation in our Epistle Reading today, as they impacted the Gentile believers in Ephesus, and by extension, you and me in our lives and world still today.

### **I. The wall came down.**

- ✘ Paul says in verse 14 that Jesus, “in His flesh” “has broken down...the dividing wall of hostility...”. That certainly sounds like Good News, doesn’t it? But what exactly is he talking about?
  - ➔ It’s something that Jesus addressed and accomplished long before you or I ever took our first breath.
- ✘ In verses 11-12 Paul reminds the new Christians in the town of Ephesus that they did not always have free access to God for forgiveness and salvation. They were not Jews – part of the “chosen people” with bloodlines that could be traced back to Abraham.
  - ➔ That meant that the Jewish people – NOT GOD – said that they were “separated” from the promised Messiah, considered to be “aliens” and “strangers” who were not included in God’s covenant promise of salvation that He made with Abraham. The bottom line was that their chances for salvation were virtually impossible in the eyes of those who were supposedly the experts – that is the Jews. As Paul says they had “no hope”; they were “without God in the world” (v.12).

→ But then Jesus came into the world as the promised Christ and He wasn't bound by those manmade laws created by the Jews. He came in subjection only to God's perfect Law in Scripture, which He lived out to perfection for all people – Gentile and Jew; those who had already lived and died, as well as those who were still yet to come in the years ahead, like our time now today.

✘ When Jesus died on the cross He paid for the guilt of all sinners; all people of every nation and background; ever man, woman and child who could not, and cannot, and will not be able to obey God's Law to perfection. And He rose from death as proof that God's penalty of death for sin is now satisfied in Jesus.

→ That separating wall of sin and death, as Paul says, has been torn down by His sacrifice for us. Colossians 1:21-22 says this: "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [the Son] has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before [God]."

✘ Unfortunately though, the Church has not always received the truth of Christ's death as a broken-down wall. That was especially true here in Paul's day, as he was reaching out to those outside of The Promised Land.

→ And why have they rejected Christ's work? The motivations were likely many; things like arrogance, pride, even fear of change and corruption. Those outside of Israel's bloodline were viewed and treated as second-class citizens! They were not circumcised as the Jews were by law. They ate pork, shrimp, and lobster which was against Jewish tradition. They still had contact with unbelieving Gentile friends and family which the Jews said contaminated them and would exclude them from citizenship in God's kingdom.

→ Yes, we are truly blessed to live in our day today, aren't we? Because Christ came to tear all of those walls that seem so foreign to us down. I mean, we've never been in a situation like these people in Ephesus, have we; when we haven't had access to God through the Spirit?

## II. New walls went up.

✘ But Paul addresses in this text another kind of wall that I'm afraid we and our world, and even we in Christ's Church have experienced, because we have rebuilt it. Let's get at this by way of a question. Back in history, what would a city's first priority be if an invader attacked and knocked down the wall that was supposed to protect the citizens inside? Would they leave the wall in ruins? No way! Immediately, they would work to rebuild it even bigger and stronger than before, right?

→ And what would you do first if your home or property were broken into? You'd repair the damaged fence or gate; you'd quickly replace your locks or doors or windows, wouldn't you? Why? Because doing so, provides a barrier; a wall of sorts, that gives you a sense of comfort and safety from the "bad guys" on the other side.

✘ This brings us to the problem that Paul and his readers were facing in our text. Paul says that Jesus knocked down "the dividing wall of hostility" (v. 14). The wall he's talking about consisted of those things that still separated Jew from non-Jew, even after Jesus had come and done His work.

- You see, there was an elaborate set of some 613 Jewish laws, called Mitzvot, that are still officially in place today that gave Jews their own unique identity. These were commandments that the leaders invented, like bloodline restrictions for interaction with others and dietary and hygiene-related and labor and daily activity-restricting laws – all with the unrealistic idea that by following every one, a person could earn a place of good-standing before God.
- But remember, Jesus already accomplished that for all people in His perfect life and death and resurrection.
- ✘ On top of that, there was an actual physical wall constructed around the outside of the temple about 4-5 feet high called the Soreg with signs posted that read, “Let no foreigner (i.e. Gentile) enter within the screen and enclosure surrounding the sanctuary. Whoever is caught doing so, he will be overtaken by death”.
- These were the very real barriers that divided the Jews from all other people – the Gentiles. And today Christians have built up our own identity markers, recreating similar feelings of hostility or what many view as an “us versus them” mentality with hundreds of denominations and sects and cults. Why is that?
- ✘ The answer to that question has two parts. First, there is an actual command from Scripture, telling us that in very specific circumstances, we must be careful not to associate too closely with others. For example, Paul talks about how we determine those with whom we should or should not partake of Holy Communion in 1 Corinthians 11:18-19 and he says, “When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized”.
- So when it comes to a matter of what is actually taught directly in the Bible, if someone wants to change or go against the clear teaching of God’s Word, then we are to identify and guard against those false beliefs, because they can end up harming us in our faith and even put our salvation at risk.
- ✘ But when it comes to manmade rules and customs, or attitudes that actually promote unnecessary and ungodly separation from any group or groups of people, then those are walls that we have built back up because of our own sinful fear or pride, or for our own selfish greed or gain.
- For example, one Christian congregation feared all the change that was occurring in their surrounding neighborhood, so much so, that they rejected the idea of a second service in the language of their neighbors. Why? because they said, “If we do, they will eventually outnumber us and ‘take over’ the church.”
- And it’s not just walls based on ethnic origin. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that the most segregated hour in society happens at 11 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Think about that. It’s not just a separation based upon skin color, but also walls based on generational differences and worship styles where “personal preference” becomes more important than Scriptural teaching and worshipping the One true God together in “Spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23-24).
- For example, does giving exclusive attention to Millennials or older generations or children because we desperately want them in our church mean that we exclude or no longer welcome

the other generations? Or what about those walls that exist because our church caters especially to those who are wealthy or more educated or belong to a particular political party or social agenda? Is the desire that most of us should be surrounded by those who are “like us” a “wall” that Paul means in verse 14 when he says that Jesus made both Jews and Gentiles “one” by breaking down the dividing wall of hostility?

### **III. The wall needs to come down again.**

- ✘ When you and I are searching for a place in the Church to “belong”; where we can be “at peace”, folks, looking for or building walls is NOT the answer. No, in fact it is the opposite. Paul says in verse 14 that “Christ is our peace”!
  - ➔ He is the “cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (v. 20-21).
- ✘ He is the center, the focus, the foundation and what the Church and our entire life is to be about. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is where we find our unity; where we find our fulfillment – not in only gathering with people who look like me, sing like me, play like me and check off all of the other selfish checkmarks that make up “my” perfect church.
  - ➔ No, the only “perfect” church is the “one holy Christian and apostolic Church” of which we confess in the Nicene Creed that Jesus built by first breaking down “in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility” when He died on the cross to overcome your divisive sin and mine.
- ✘ His task for you and me today is the same as it was for the Christians in Ephesus and around the world when Paul wrote this text. In Romans 15:7 he directs the church, “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”.
  - ➔ And how has Christ welcomed you? To begin with He saw you in all of your sin and corruption, with all of your flaws and bigotry and pride, and He lovingly opened His arms – yes to embrace you, but first to die for you.
  - ➔ Not that we can ever die to save another person from sin, but we can make personal sacrifices in order to welcome others who may be different into our midst. We can take the step toward breaking down the earthly walls that separate us one from another, so that as Paul says in verses 15-16, in Christ we then become “one new man in place of the two” and might be reconciled to God “in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility”. That’s Christ’s work and His goal for us all.
- ✘ May these walls come a’tumbling down all around us, to the glory of Jesus, forevermore. Amen.