

A Castle for a King

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[0 : 00] We resist the call to become one. We resist the call to become one, and naturally, one of our defaults, I think, is to use our distinctions to keep others at a distance, resisting that call.

If that is true in today's world, it was definitely true in Ephesus. The Ephesian church and the surrounding area were predominantly Gentile, but most likely that church had a Jewish core. And in the first century, animosity and hostility was at the point of hatred. Let me remind you, the Jerusalem temple, albeit in a different city to the church here, is what Paul is echoing when he talks of this dividing wall of hostility in verse 14, because the Jerusalem temple had a literal stone wall that separated the Gentiles, the non-Jews, from the inner courts where only the Jews could go. Not only did it separate, but it had inscriptions warning non-Jews that they would be responsible for their own death if they crossed into the restricted area.

Jews and Gentiles grew up with this kind of spiritual hierarchy as the kind of everyday backdrop to their understanding of the world. Now, I know churches can fall out and have differences of opinion, but I've yet to find one that has death threats on the wall with separating rooms for each other.

[1 : 34] And so you might look at the hostility of the first century and think, well, we don't have that problem. But that doesn't mean that the disease has disappeared.

It's just mutated. The exact same spiritual rule, the desire to protect ourselves, the pride of our background, and the fear of people who are different, it still exists.

It just looks more polite today. Instead of building walls of active hostility, we build passive, thoughtless, invisible walls of comfort. We should celebrate our distinct differences, but so often they become the very things that drive a wedge between us.

And the strange thing is, it doesn't have to, these days, it doesn't have to be a massive difference to cause the divide. It can be as simple as cliques that form around similarities, which then keep those with different life circumstances on the periphery.

You'll know this. It's true in most churches. Maybe all the families with young kids seem to gravitate towards each other and hang out.

[2 : 45] Maybe all the, you know, the blokes who like to watch the football, naturally they've got something to talk about. And it can easily happen where you get in groups.

C.S. Lewis called it the inner ring, where you gain kind of social capital, social currency by fitting in. And those who don't possess the right character traits, the right shared interests, are left out, and often not intentionally, but simply through thoughtless behavior.

Now, don't hear me wrongly here. It is completely natural to retreat and gravitate towards people who are similar and have something in common. You know, it can feel awkward.

It's kind of attempting to have fellowship and spend time with people who are different. Yet as good as it is, and it is good to have close friendships, what I'm saying is, if all we ever do is retreat to those similar, if we're not careful, it can function as almost like a fig leaf to hide behind.

We can hide behind our shared interests because it feels safer than true openness and vulnerability. Letting people who are different get too close, can feel risky. If we were to act like that, of course, there would be, there is a cost to it, isn't there, if we only ever retreat.

[4 : 10] We might look like one body externally on a Sunday morning, or evening, or wherever it is that we meet, yet internally, our distinctions would mean we didn't actually know each other.

A lack of openness and vulnerability limits how God is able to use each other in each other's lives. The world knows this tension, but it attempts to meet the problem with a broken solution. It does one of two things.

It tries to force everyone to be exactly the same, like identical bricks, or in the flip side, it leans heavily into forming cliques and tribes, where to be allowed in, you have to meet a certain standard

to be accepted.

Now, you might know people who aren't Christians who do a wonderful job of treating people equally while celebrating their difference, and that is a beautiful thing, but the reality is, without the foundation here, our culture is just constantly swaying between two extremes of tribalism and conformity.

[5 : 24] The world wants the beautiful house of equality, but it has no foundation to build it on. It's actually, you know, it's actually only the God of the Bible who can provide this foundation, because his plan is to create, as we read, one new man, one new humanity from every different people group.

That's where we're going to go next. The principle created to be one new man. This is the better way. God creates one new man from distinct individuals, giving them equality, equal before him. Verse 14. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Hostility. By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in audiences, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two.

So making peace. The two groups, Jew and Gentile, Jew and non-Jew, become one. The barrier between them is destroyed. The wall designed to separate, to divide, is removed, because that is what a wall is for, right?

[6 : 50] If you put it over a wall, it's there to cordon off. When the wall is brought down, when the barrier is removed, it has this amazing effect, that it removes any sense of hierarchy, because all people stand before the throne of God, with their difference intact, but as one, and the playing field is leveled.

Verse 18. For through him, through Jesus, we both have access in one spirit to the Father. There is no superior or secret way in.

All believers come to God the Father, the exact same way, through Jesus, the exact same way, by one spirit, the exact same way. It doesn't matter if you've been following Jesus for five minutes or 50 years, whether you're the minister of a church, or a five-year-old child, whether you're from Yorkshire, or you're Scottish, whether you worship in a free church, or in Westminster Abbey, whether you have an amazing worship band, or like us, you sing from recordings, whether you're rich or poor, we all, all of us, have the exact same access to the Father, through him, through Jesus, by one spirit.

The spirit is the mortar, that holds the distinct stones together, united to Jesus, and united to one another. It's at this point, it's appropriate to ask, well, how does that access come about?

How is this level playing field achieved? How is this diverse, yet beautiful, equal family, this temple of hand-crafted bricks, built and assembled? Well, it happens because of the good news, of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 34] Everything that is true, of our fractured, wall-building humanity, Jesus stepped right into. Yet Jesus, a Jewish man, living in a deeply divided culture, never showed hostility to anyone.

He never showed hostility, because of anybody's background, anybody's status, or ethnicity. You think about his life, he intentionally crossed, the deepest cultural divides, to sit with a Samaritan woman, at the well.

He marveled at the faith, of a Roman centurion. But it wasn't just ethnic boundaries, he shattered. Think about the outcasts, who were not allowed anywhere, near the temple, the crippled, the lame, the lepers, the people, society had safely, took to, took to way, behind invisible walls.

Jesus sought them out. He spoke to them, he touched them, he healed them, he acknowledged their big differences, yet he flattened out the hierarchy. He interacted with their distinct, unique pain, but he loved them all equally, as image bearers, of the living God.

Jesus at the cross himself, was divided, and treated as hostile to God, with a war between him and his father, separated, so that we could become one.

[9 : 56] One, he experienced the devastating reality, of separation, so that we would never have to, because he took our hostility, upon himself, we're brought into union with him.

And when we become one with Christ, a miracle happens. We who have built walls, to keep each other at a distance, who have an insurmountable wall, between ourselves and God, are finally made one with him, and therefore one with each other.

To tear down this dividing wall of hostility for good, Jesus had to do more than just cross boundaries, during his earthly life, he had to absorb the wall itself.

This is what reorients the heart. This is what reorients the heart, and allows us to see each other, different but equal. That the concept of tiered, or special access to God, just becomes a nonsense.

We no longer come to God, with our differing starting places, hanging on in the background, but we're brought to God the Father, by the exact same person, in the exact same way. Verse 13.

[11 : 09] But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away, but you who once have been brought, but now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

And the result? The end of verse 15. We've seen it already, that he might in himself, create one new man in place of the two, so make him peace.

Tribalism is destroyed, but that a diverse one new man is created, a temple fit for God to dwell, by his spirit. And so how will we respond?

In light of the cross, of light of what Jesus has done, it means, this is what it means for us, this is what it means for us here, this evening, it means we get to be distinct, and yet built together as one. Because the wall is gone, we don't have to hide behind our fig leaves anymore. Distinct stones built together as one. Empowered by the spirit of God, we can use our God-given diversity and distinctions, not to keep one another at a distance, but to be something spectacular.

[12 : 23] We get to be a temple, or a castle perhaps, a living temple of God's grace. We get to be one diverse family, a family where we share and love and delight and rejoice in one another's differences.

Knowing that we stand together before the living God on a perfectly equal playing field. Rather than only ever spending time with those who are similar, hiding from our differences, rather than settling for the safe comfort of being unknown, we get to be our true selves.

Free to be open and share life. Share our struggles and our sins, our joys and our sorrows, without any fear of being looked down on or worrying about what somebody might think of us.

We actually get to be the church, the caring, open community that don't we all desperately long for? Here in this new, one new man, this new humanity, the church, God's people, our differences are actually what strengthens us.

Deep relationships, real relationships, being built understanding and sharing with one another because we share the same heavenly Father. As Paul declares in verse 19, so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

[13 : 54] Further down, verse 21, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him, in him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

We are beautifully dependent on one another and we are dependent on being different. We are distinct stones joined by the grace of Christ, built together as one.

As we come in for landing, when you look around the church this evening, who God is building us, you, to be, what do you see?

Do you see uniformed, mass-produced brick people? Or do you see a unique bunch of people cobbled together by the Lord? Distinct each one, and yet one in Christ.

This is exactly, it's exactly what the church should look like. Built individually, and yet the exact same time, built together to be a temple, a castle, if you will, fit for a king.

[15 : 01] How did it happen? It's the blood of Christ that has brought us all near. Jesus took the dividing wall of hostility into his own body on the cross. He absorbed our distance, our tribalism, and our division, bringing us near to the Father and bringing us to be beautifully one in him.

And as we do draw in for a close, I just want to say, if this touches a nerve, if letting people in is hard for you, if keeping people at arm's length feel safe, behind your distinctions, or maybe you look around the church and you feel like somehow you just don't belong, I want to invite and encourage you to know this.

You belong here as much as anyone else. You're in the right place. You're with God's people.

Because of what Jesus has done, you are free to let down the pretense, let down your guard, and let yourself be truly known.

Because this, this is your family. This is your family. And together we're one in him.
Let me pray. Almighty God, I praise you for what you have done.

[16:38] What you have done to the world is impossible. And I thank you that we see that even in our church, in the church this evening. I thank you that you have taken that wall of hostility, you absorbed it in your own body on the cross.

You have made us one. And now we're united to you by the spirit of God and we're united to one another. I thank you that you level the playing field, that there's no one who, nobody comes in a special way.

We all come through Jesus by the one spirit to the Father. We all have the same access. And so I praise you for what you've done on the cross. And so Lord God, I do come to you and I do ask for anyone this evening who finds this a challenge, who prefers to keep people at arm's length, where that's difficult, I pray that they, that tonight, there'd be the, that you'd work so powerfully that they'd know that this is, that each and every person here would increasingly know that this is their family, that they could be known and they wouldn't have to worry about doing the right thing to look like they fit in.

Even sometimes church things that we want to look good and make sure that we're doing the right things in church to be accepted. I pray that all those pretenses we could let down and truly be accepted as the people of God, distinct and yet the same.

And so I come to you and ask for this in the name of Jesus. Amen.