

A Castle for a King

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[0:00] Lord God, we thank you for the word of God. We thank you for the Bible. We thank you that this is the way, the primary way that you've decided and ordained throughout the history of the church, that you want to speak to us.

And there is an abundance of you speaking to us. And so we pray for our hearts now that you'd speak to us individually, but that you'd also speak to us together as a family, as a body.

And so that we would be, as we hear the word, that you'd be transforming our hearts as a body to live more and more like your son. We ask for this in the name of Christ.

Amen. Before we get there, just as kind of a way of introduction, just gonna, we'll get to reading the passage in just a moment. But I suppose if you were to go and watch some of the new houses being built, it's quite easy to do that round Winch Brothers.

There's thousands, for me, every time I seem to go out the house, there seems to be another one finished. But if you go out, there's something specific. You notice about, you know, you can look at the bricks being used.

[1:07] And because they're trying to build so many so quickly, each kind of housing development, what you'd notice is that the bricks that are used there, they're uniform, they're identical. They're made to exact measurements.

And it's right, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with that. It's efficient and it saves time and money. However, if you would go look at the stones used to build, say, you go in the centre of Edinburgh, take a look at Edinburgh Castle, you'd see something entirely different.

You don't see identical, you know, bricks. You see uniquely shaped, distinct stones. All different, yet beautifully fitted together for a king to live in.

There has always been a deep confusion. Not how to build castles with unique stones, but to build societies from unique people. There's always been a struggle to hold the tension between equality, what humanity shares, what we have in common, hold that intention with our distinctions, what makes us different from one another.

And if you look at the history, this is not a new thing. It leads to polarisation. It's probably amplified on social media. And that is what we're going to see is exactly the problem we have in the first century.

[2:29] And it's been a problem both in and out with the church and in society for centuries. And it's a problem within Ephesus and the surrounding area. And at this time, the problem, the distinction, is it's an ethnic one.

It's the difference between Jews and non-Jews. The Bible refers to non-Jews as always Gentiles. That is the distinction. Now, I want to be clear.

Being different is a beautiful thing. Being different is a beautiful thing. Different backgrounds and ethnicities are beautiful, aren't they? And it's a good...

But it's also a good thing to enjoy being different. It's a good thing to enjoy having a history, having a culture, having a background. Being patriotic to be Scottish or to be from Yorkshire, to love your country or your county, and to celebrate that unique heritage is good.

There's nothing wrong with that. It can be celebrated and you can do that in a good way. However, it becomes a problem when the differences are overplayed and the similarities are forgotten.

[3:38] When being patriotic turns into contempt for other nations and ethnicities, true equality gets erased. Backgrounds, ethnicity and

nationality become used not to celebrate diversity, but to build walls of separation and segregation.

However, you can also counter that with the opposite error. You've got one extreme that can go to, you know, majoring on the distinctions. But the opposite error is the alternative, is to go the other way and ignore differences altogether.

Because it's equally as problematic to force people to hide their uniqueness and think it's not important. You might have heard this, and I've heard often well-meaning people say, about people who are different, maybe different ethnicities or different colours of skin, they say, I don't see colour or background, I just see people.

That sounds like equality, doesn't it? But in actual fact, it erases the beautiful God-given ethnic and cultural differences created. It subtly says to treat you with equality, I must ignore what makes you distinct.

When equality is pushed, at the expense of diversity and distinction, the world is saying, if you want to be equal, you must sand down your uniqueness and become a uniform human brick.

[5:08] When the living God makes a people for himself, he's not building with a collection of identical people. He doesn't use a human cookie cutter, but he's building the most ornate building.

Verse 22 says, a temple which we'll see, a dwelling place fit for God to live in by his spirit. And so there is an opportunity this morning to consider as we read the word of God, to consider what God is doing and say, what if, rather than using our God-given distinctions to keep others at a distance, what if we recognise we're all deeply different and yet profoundly the same?

This morning really is the opportunity to consider what it means to live as one, to be a diverse body, a temple that actually shares and loves our differences and yet is uniquely knitted together.

If you're exhausted and tired of living in a world that demands you either weaponise your differences or erase them completely, there is a better way.

Let's look at what God has to say in Ephesians chapter 2, beginning in verse 11. 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.

[6:52] But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off 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 commandments 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 off and priests to those who were near. For through him, we both have access to the Father by one spirit. 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.

Right from the off, I think Paul is writing to a problem in the church. The problem is there's a resistance of the call to become one.

[8:27] That is where kind of the natural default is to use distinctions to keep others at a distance, resisting God's call to become truly one.

And that was definitely the case in Ephesus. The Ephesian church, the surrounding area, it was predominantly Gentile, but it likely had a kind of a Jewish core to the church.

And in the first century, animosity between Jew and Gentile was extreme. It was at the point of hatred. Let me remind you, not in Ephesus, but in Jerusalem, in the temple, you know, it's a different city.

But what Paul is echoing here, something that is true of the Jerusalem temple, that there was actually a wall built. In verse 14, we say, we hear about that wall of hostility, but there was a stone

wall in the temple that separated Gentiles, the non-Jews, from the inner courts where only the Jews could go.

Not only did it separate, but it actually had inscriptions on the wall that warned non-Jews that they would be responsible for their own death if they crossed into that restricted area.

[9:44] Jews and Gentiles grew up with that culture, with that kind of, kind of almost like a spiritual hierarchy hierarchy, as the 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 rocks on the wall with separating rooms for each other. And so, you know, you might look at the hostility of the first century and think, well, we don't really have that problem.

However, that doesn't mean this disease has disappeared. It's just mutated. The exact same spiritual route, the desire to protect ourselves, the pride of our background, the fear of people who are different 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, it can be the thing that drives kind of like an invisible wedge.

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

[11:15] Maybe you've seen that in other churches that you've been a part of, you know, or you might have noticed, you know, sometimes you, it can be easy for all those maybe who've got young kids seem to gravitate and hang out.

Maybe all the men who like talking about football have something to talk about. It's those kind of things. And what can happen is those can easily become in groups. C.S. Lewis talks about something called the inner ring where you gain social capital, social currency by fitting it in and have the right sort of things to enjoy.

Those who don't possess the right character trait, the right shared interest, are left out, not intentionally but simply through kind of not thinking. Now don't hear me wrongly on this.

Don't hear me wrongly. It's completely natural to retreat and gravitate towards people who are similar and have something in common. In many ways it's a good thing to have those things that we can share.

It can feel awkward attempting to have fellowship and spend time with people who are different to us. Yet as good as it is to have those things that we can share, what I'm saying is if all we ever do is retreat to those similarities, if we're not careful, without knowing it, they can function as a fig leaf to hide behind.

[12:40] 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 a little bit risky.

If we were only to ever act like that there would be a cost. We would, what would happen is we would look like one body but externally on a Sunday morning and yet internally our distinctions would mean we didn't actually know each other.

That lack of openness and vulnerability it limits how God is able to use each of us in each other's lives. The world knows this tension.

The world knows it. I've started that from the off. But the problem is the world attempts to meet the broken problem with a broken solution. It does one of two things. It tries to force everyone to be exactly the same.

Those like identical bricks. Or on 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.

[13:50] Now you might know people who aren't Christians who do a wonderful job of treating people with equality while celebrating their differences. That is a beautiful thing if we see it in the world.

The issue is that without a foundation without something to rest that kind of way of life on our culture is we constantly sway between these two extremes of tribalism or conformity.

The world wants the beautiful house of equality but has no real foundation to build it on. It's actually really the foundation of this is it's only the God of the Bible who can provide that foundation because his plan is his plan what we see in God's word his plan is to create one new humanity that word humanity is actually just man one new man from every different people group worshipping together which is where we're kind of going to go next.

We've talked about the problem this is kind of the principle that is applied that this is the better way that God creates one new man from distinct individuals giving them all equality before him.

Look with me of what God does from verse 14 we read for he himself is our peace he's talking about Jesus who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier the dividing wall of hostility how?

[15:22] 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.

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 I mean that is what a wall is put up for right?

If you put up a wall it is there to separate it's there to cordon off when the wall is brought down when the barrier is removed the effect is profound because what it does it removes any sense of hierarchy because all people then stand before the throne of God with their difference intact but as one it levels the playing field verse 18 for through him that's through Jesus through him we both have access to the Father by one spirit the same access there is no superior or secret way in all believers whatever background come to God the Father the exact same way through Jesus Christ by one Holy Spirit that doesn't mean that doesn't matter if you've been following Jesus for five minutes or 50 years whether you're the minister of the church or a five year old child whether you're Scottish or from Yorkshire whether you worship in a free church or in Westminster Abbey whether you have an amazing worship band or you sing from recordings whether you're rich or poor whatever the background we all have the same access to God the Father through Jesus Christ by one spirit the spirit of God is the mortar holding those distinct all of those distinct stones together united to Jesus and united to one another how does it come about well it comes about through the gospel that Jesus died to make us one how is this level playing field achieved how is this diverse yet beautifully equal family the temple of handcrafted stones built and assembled it happens because of the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ everything that is true of our fractured wall building humanity

Jesus steps right into Jesus a Jewish man living in a deeply divided culture never showed hostility to anyone because of their background their status or their ethnicity you think about his life he intentionally crossed the deepest cultural divides to sit with the Samaritan woman at the well he marveled at the faith of a Roman centurion and 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 tucked away behind invisible walls Jesus sought them out he spoke to them he touched them he healed them he acknowledged their big differences yet he completely flattened out the hierarchy he interacted with their distinct unique pain but he loved them all equally as image bearers and what happens well it's at the cross

Jesus is the one who's divided Jesus is the one treated as hostile to God with a war between him and his father so that we could become one he experienced the devastating reality of separation so that we never would have to he took our hostility upon himself which brought us into union with him and when we become one with Christ the miracle happens we who have built walls to keep others at a distance and who had an insurmountable wall between ourselves and God have finally made one with him and therefore one with each other to tear!

[19:39] 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 it's this that reorientates our hearts it's this that changes the concept of tiered or special access to God just becomes a nonsense because we no longer come to God with our different starting places hanging in the background but brought to God the Father by the same person in the exact same way verse 13 but now in Christ Jesus you who are once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ verse

15 his purpose was again was to create in himself one 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 tribalism is destroyed but a diverse one new man is created a temple fit for

God to dwell by his spirit the question is how will we respond to what Jesus has done we get to be distinct and yet built together as one because the wall is gone we don't have to hide between our fig leaves anymore that's how we respond that we respond as distinct stones who are built together and it means this it means empowered by the spirit of God the mortar that joins us together we can use our God given diversity and distinctions not to keep one another at a distance but to be something spectacular we get to be a castle 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 of those differences knowing that we stand together before the living God and a perfectly equal playing field rather than only ever spending time with those who are similar hiding rather than settling for the safe comfort of being unknown we get to be our true selves we're free to be open and share life we get to share struggles and sins our joys and our sorrows without fear of being looked down on or worried about what someone might think of us we get to actually be that caring open community that we all so desperately long for here in this new humanity the church

God's people our differences are actually what strengthens us we get to build deep relationships and go deep into understanding and sharing with one another because we share the same heavenly father as Paul declares in verse 19 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 we are beautifully dependent on one another and we are dependent on being different distinct stones joined by the grace of God built together as one when you look around the church this morning at who God is building us to be what do you see what do you see because what

I don't what I see is I don't see uniform identical bricks even as a small church plant we are in a unique bunch of people cobbled together by the living God we are distinct each one of us and yet we are one in Jesus this is exactly what the church should look like built together being built individually and yet at the same time built together to be a temple a castle if you will fit for a king and how did this happen well 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 I just want to it's worth saying as as beautiful as this sounds as we draw to a close today if letting people in is hard for you if keeping people at an arm's length feels safe behind your distinctions or maybe even if you look around church and feel like somehow you just don't belong

I want to invite and encourage you to know 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're free to let down the pretense let down your guard and let yourself be truly known because this is your family and together we're one in him let's pray almighty God it is a beautiful thing to be known by you and it is a beautiful thing to know that we meet together this morning as a family in Christ we meet together as people who are different unique distinct and yet we share that we all come to you in the same way through Jesus by one spirit we have access to God the father we all call you father and you don't love anyone more or less you love us all the same we're on a level playing field and so I pray that oneness that we share that you would use that to mould and fashion us to be that together sometimes it's easy to retreat and sometimes that's ok but I pray that you would teach us what it looks like to live that out even when it's hard

[26:21] Lord teach us what it looks like help us to love one another and so we praise you for your goodness that this is it's amazing to behold what you're doing that you're making a place a dwelling place fit for you building us together not building us as individuals but building us together to be one and so we pray for your blessing that you'd move powerfully and we ask for this in the name of Christ Amen