

Open the Eyes of My Heart (Part 11)

Ephesians 2:11-22

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When my wife and I were on a cruise for our honeymoon, we came to the ship's movie theatre early to get good seats for a movie and found that a Jewish service was going on at the front of the theatre. We were about to leave but they welcomed us to join them and partake in the bread and wine they were eating. They were so warm to us Gentiles, but when we look at today's passage we are reminded that it wasn't always like this.

Reading through Acts and the epistles we get the sense of hostility between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. Jews had the attitude that Jesus belonged to them alone because He is the King of Israel. Though they knew Jesus had let the Gentiles in as well, they preferred that they stayed away. This is because up until that time Jews didn't associate with Gentiles. This dynamic was the norm and was understood by both Jews and Gentiles, which we can see in passages like John 4:9. And again Paul reminds the Gentiles in the church that they were formerly outcasts in Ephesians 2:11-12. Whereas in 2:1-3 Paul reminded both Gentiles and Jews of how they were formerly dead in sin and how God turned things around, now he focuses on the Gentiles only, reminding them of how they were formerly far from God and how God turned things around for them specifically. In v. 11 he says the Gentiles were called "uncircumcised," which is actually a term of derision. In 1 Samuel 17:20-26 David uses this racial slur to insult Goliath. Even later in Matthew 15:22-28, Jesus speaks to a Canaanite woman and compares the Gentiles to dogs who didn't have the rights of the children of the household, because they didn't have the status of being God's people yet. And Jesus finds her faith remarkable because she accepts the fact that she is a dog and shouldn't receive what belongs to the Jews, but she also realizes that Jesus is so benevolent and abundant in love that His blessing overflows to everyone. By the end of Jesus' ministry Israel had rejected Jesus, so He opened the door to the Gentiles. But even then the Jews still held this prejudice against the Gentiles in the church, constantly reminding them that they didn't belong, that Jesus belonged to the Jews, and that Jesus was handed over to Gentiles to be executed.

This dynamic was similar to that of the United States during the time of segregation. We can imagine that seating, meals, and even communion would have been segregated by Jews and Gentiles. This kind of prejudice shouldn't be so foreign to us. Like the Jews, the Chinese are

very ethnocentric, viewing their nation as the center of the world and considering all others as outsiders. This feeling that outsiders are somehow inferior is the same as how Jews in the early church felt about Gentiles.

But in v. 13 Paul says once again that God turns things around, bringing near to Himself the Gentiles who were once far away. He broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, bringing them together in the body of Christ. And in v. 15 we see that this was accomplished by abolishing the Law. We don't need to follow these rules to please God, since He has already accepted us. For example the prohibition against tattoos no longer applies to us. If you don't want your kids to get a tattoo, it's because of your preference, not because God demands it. Another example is tithing, which was an exact 10% religious tax. In the body of Christ we don't need to give exactly 10%, but rather we should give according to what God has put on our hearts to give, and according to how much God has entrusted us with. Think about the widow who Jesus commended for giving 100% of the little that she had. The final example is the Sabbath, which most of us don't keep anyways. Even this, one of the Ten Commandments, no longer applies to us. We don't strictly rest on the Sabbath, but we should find rest in Jesus every day.

Once again, the result of abolishing the Law is that the barrier of hostility was removed between the Jews and Gentiles. In vv. 13-18 Paul emphasizes the idea of peace, reconciliation, and unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church. Though we aren't bound to the Law of Moses, we are now bound to the law of love, not as a means to earn salvation, but an expected result of our new identity and new life in Jesus, whose love overflows from within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us therefore live in peace and unity with all those who are different from us in the body of Christ, for the Prince of Peace has brought us peace with God and with each other, uniting us in Him.