

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church “Tearing Down Walls & Building Bridges”**

**By Eric Howell**

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

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People have all kinds of walls between them. Some walls are made of brick and mortar and are intentionally designed to keep some people in and some people out—between neighborhoods, parts of town, between neighboring nations. Those walls are easy to see. The premise of those walls is based loosely on the old wisdom that good fences make good neighbors. We can more easily come together when we are clear about what keeps us apart.

There are other walls between people that are harder to see. In fact, usually you don't really see one until you run square into it. And even then it can be hard to tell what's going on unless you figure out you've hit a wall with someone.

Some of these walls we carefully construct. Others we inherit. Some just get built higher and higher over time as we add stones and mortar without realizing what we're constructing. But they are walls just the same. And these walls—the unseen ones—the ones that get constructed in our hearts are thicker and higher than any medieval city walls. They are fortified with pride and misunderstandings, stacked with hurt feelings and anger. Sometimes these walls are built on a foundation of theology. It is not purely an accident of personal preferences that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.

In Ephesians 2 we hear about tearing down invisible walls between people. It's one of the common themes in all of the New Testament—most of the book of Romans, in Galatians, in 1 Corinthians, Acts, here in Ephesians. In gatherings of Christians from Rome to Corinth to Galatia to Ephesus and beyond, this issue kept coming back up; it was common to churches all over—how do people who are different, and have differences do church together? I haven't done a verse count on this, but don't be surprised if a third of the New Testament is specifically about people getting along with each other in the church. It's just that hard and just that important.

You might think reading the early chapters of Acts, that this would not be a problem for the church. In the early chapters of Acts, Acts 2 to be specific, the Holy Spirit comes, the church is born, thousands of people are baptized as Christ-followers and the congregation gathered there, who can understand each other's language, is from different countries and tribes from all over. There was diversity in the early church. But also commonality. They were all Jews. Many of them took seriously Jesus' last words to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. But they weren't quite prepared for what would happen when those people at the ends of the earth—those uncircumcised, aliens, strangers, foreigners, those people outside the family—they didn't know what to do when Gentiles said, “I like that story about Jesus. I believe you. I believe in Him. I want to be a Christian. I want to be in church with you.”

They weren't quite ready for that. They were perfectly happy and excited to take the message of Jesus out. They just weren't ready for who would come in when they did. They weren't ready to tear down the invisible wall between Jews and Gentiles. That's the risk of being on a mission with and for Jesus. It changes people. And then it changes the Church. And then it changes you. And if it doesn't—if you are walled off from other people—then whatever you do may be a good project, but it is something less than the mission of Jesus.

Here's a good example. This past week in New York City, a celebrity sponsored by a candy company is sitting on a sofa on the top of Madison Square Garden, in a see-through Plexiglas box about as big as a small bedroom. He's raising money for hunger in America. That's a good and noble thing for him and his corporate sponsor. Basically, anything that anyone does that is a good thing is applaudable in my opinion. But even people on the very materialistic streets of New York sense that there is a dissonance in this. A person is trying to help people who live in the messiness of poverty by completely isolating himself from that messiness. And that seems odd, even to New Yorkers. High above the rabble of the city streets, insulated in glass box, he has assured himself that he will have no contact at all with anyone who is hungry, poor, or thirsty—the very people he's trying to help.

Which is all quite humorous and ironic, but you know what they say about throwing stones when you live in a glass house. Isn't this a true picture of much of church ministry? We want the poor to be helped, so we send some money. We want people to hear about Jesus, so we send someone else to do it. And none of it gets our hands dirty. We can sit in our glass temples looking over the drudge of the city and keep our distance behind our walls. When Jesus looked over the city, He wept, and then He went down into it and died. And that movement of Jesus, toward the challenge, toward the pain and trouble of the world, toward those with whom He contended, is the impulse that you feel when the Spirit nudges you to take a step to tear down a wall.

Fred Craddock tells about returning to his small west Tennessee hometown each Christmas. Every year he would visit an old friend named Buck. Buck owned a café on the main street of the town, and he always gave Craddock a cup of coffee and a piece of chess pie. One Christmas when Craddock went in to get his coffee and pie, Buck said, "Come on, let's go get a cup of coffee." "What's the matter?" asked Craddock, "isn't this a restaurant?" "I don't know; sometimes I wonder," Buck fired back.

Later, sitting across from Craddock, Buck asked, "Did you see the curtain?" "Yes, Buck, I saw the curtain; I always see the curtain." The curtain was in Buck's café, separating the front half of the café from the back half. White folks came in the front of the café from the main street, but black folks came in from an alley behind the café. The curtain was there to separate, to separate white people from black people.

Buck looked up and said, "Fred, the curtain has got to come down." "Good," Craddock responded, "Pull her down!" "That's easy enough for you to say," said Buck. "You come in once a year and tell me how to run my business." "Then leave it up," Craddock countered. In personal agony, Buck said, "Fred, I take that curtain down, and I lose my customers; I leave that curtain up, and I lose my soul!"

Buck was right, of course. Some curtains have to come down. Some curtains, some walls, have to come down because if we leave them up, we will lose our souls, no matter what we think we gain! The church of Jesus Christ simply must rip some curtains from top to bottom and dump them in the garbage. According to the New Testament, even with all their mistakes and missteps, the people of Jesus are curtain-ripping, wall-felling people.

If it were only so easy as the unified, righteous church going out into the world to tear down the world's unjust divisions. Walls aren't just out there, and they aren't just between here and there. Even in the church there are divisions and subdivisions, curtains and walls. It used to be that that was the way it was supposed to be. In the Jerusalem Temple there were all kinds of walls. The home of God was a place open to all, but defined by its walls. There was a wall between priests and lay people, between men and women, and between Jews and Gentiles. So you could come into the temple, but only go where you are supposed to go and stay out of the places you aren't welcome.

Nowadays walls in congregations are usually invisible. And, let us confess today, that walls are still there. Invisible, thin as glass, but sometimes hard as a diamond. Or at least it feels that way. We cry with the psalmist, "How beautiful it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity." We know how hard that unity is to forge. Deliver us Lord from the things that have divided the hearts of brothers and sisters from one another in Your Church: genuine misunderstanding, honest disagreements, personality conflicts, parenting styles, theological divergences, longevity of membership, educational levels, pride, resentment, political commitments, the preference for one color of carpet over another, one style of music over another, preference for how you dress for church, whether there should be a clock on the back wall, whether a certain mission should be funded, who got the plum committee assignment (as if there is one), and family histories.

Out in the lawn, on either side of the red brick church in which I was ordained to ministry, there were tombstones here and there. Some on this side. Some on that side. Cecil Sherman, who came to town at my request to preach the ordination sermon, got out of the car in the front yard and made two immediate observations. He looked over the well-mowed and trimmed lawn and rightly concluded, "Someone loves this place." And then he observed the gravestones on either side of the yard and mused, "Those folks must not have gotten along with each other."

On every common piece of ground in a congregation, and this has been true from the beginning, there is a potential foundation for another wall and another break in the unity of God's church. What is true about human nature and the world we live in is this. We don't usually intentionally build those invisible walls between people. They just happen unless we ask Christ to remove the bricks when they start stacking up in us. And as hard as that can be, the church is the place where it's possible.

Ephesians puts it like this:

*Now in Christ you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He himself is our peace, who made us both one and has*

*broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.*

And later:

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus is the capstone, in which the whole structure, joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.*

In the church, Jesus Christ binds our hearts together. Whatever may separate any of us from one another is secondary to the incomparable joy and strength we have as Christians gathered together. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that we meet each other as fellow Christians as bringers of the message of salvation one to another. This is the goal of Christian community: Christians meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. That message, a message the whole world needs, we need again and again to hear from one another. That message comes with different words:

“I’m sorry.” “I forgive you.” “Welcome to church, sit with me.” “I don’t understand—help me understand you.” “Tell me about your week. No really, what happened?” “How can I help?” “I will pray for you.”

If these are the words of the message of salvation, the prayer of the message of salvation is the prayer of St. Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

There’s this story about Jesus in the gospel of Mark. He leaves Israel and crosses over the lake to Genneseret—the foreigners, the other people, the ones we don’t care for. He goes to the other side. That movement—going to the other side of whatever obstacle there is, making walls into bridges seems to be a very Gospel movement. We can’t solve all of our divisions in one day. We can build bridges instead of walls one at a time.

David Wilcox tells this neat little story about a carpenter who’d come to town and found two farmers whose land was separated by a small creek bed. The farmers, used to be best friends, were in an argument about a cat. The cat had gone to one and the other and both had given it a bit of milk. And one thought the cat was his and the other thought the cat was his. And as these things go, they argued and fussed and cussed, and it wasn’t

really about the cat. It was about life and old resentments and scabbed wrongs that never healed. And now the once best friends hadn't spoken a word in months. And this carpenter came looking for work and this farmer said, "I've got some work for you. I want you to build a fence right by that creek. I don't want to even look over at that fellow." Carpenter said, "Ok. I see you've got some wood in the back. That'll be enough to get started." Farmer said, "Good. I'll go get some more and be back later." And he leaves, goes to town thinking about how he'll finally be rid of that guy next door. But when he comes back, he can't believe his eyes. In place of a fence, the carpenter had built a bridge. And crossing over that bridge onto his land was his neighbor, big old stupid grin on his face, hand outstretched. "You're a brave man with that bridge. I thought you'd never talk to me again." And the farmer hears himself saying, "Aw, I knew it was your cat." And standing there, both of them see the carpenter walking off down the road. "Where you going? I've got some more work. . . . Huh?" "No, my work is done here. I'm needed elsewhere."

May the Master Carpenter build a bridge in you to cross whatever distance you need crossed in place of whatever invisible wall is there now. Amen.

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