



On June 12, 1987 President Ronald Reagan presented a speech in Berlin, West Germany. Speaking near the Brandenburg Gate of the infamous Berlin Wall, President Reagan offered the now-famous line, addressed to Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, *Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!* As I remember, and admittedly my memory is a bit foggy, I thought the line was more than a little bit of wishful thinking. *That's never going to happen* was my initial reaction.

But we certainly remember when the wall fell, don't we? It was an amazing historical moment, especially for those of us who grew up in the era of the Cold War and remember the control the Soviet Union exerted across Eastern Europe.

The fall of the Berlin Wall created a great sense of hope, a hope that the many divisions among humanity could be healed. Perhaps, many believed, the fall of that wall was a harbinger of things to come, of a new era in which more bridges would be built and fewer walls erected. Obviously that hasn't happened, but we can continue to hope.

This morning we continue our series of messages *Life Lessons On Faith*, and today's topic is *Tearing Down Walls*. In my family, we were taught to treat everyone fairly and equally. My siblings and I were taught that all people were equal, regardless of race, social or economic status, or any other factor. That is how we were raised. That does not mean, however, that I am without prejudices and judgments about others. We are influenced by many factors, and we can be unaware of the reality that we have attitudes and beliefs that cause us to see some people differently. When we see people differently, and when we judge them because we see them differently, we help to erect the walls that separate people from one another.

Our text for this morning comes from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, and he is writing about the walls that had been erected between people, specifically the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile.

Ephesians 2:11-22 –

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)—
12 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.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the

dividing wall of hostility,

15 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,

16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,

20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

While some of the language and way of writing Paul uses sounds somewhat foreign to us, this is basically the situation –

1. Walls of Separation Are Not the Natural State of Humanity.

One of the reasons why I chose this picture is because it is ugly. There is a beauty, of course, when a wall of separation such as the Berlin Wall comes down, but it's an ugly wall. It was a blight on the landscape. It was a blight upon God's beautiful creation.

God did not create humanity with a sense of division. There is a great deal of diversity, obviously, which is a sign that God loves diversity and variety, but the intent of God was not that those differences would build walls. Can you imagine only one kind of bird in the world? Can you imagine only one kind of flower? One kind of tree? One season (although I could go with summer all the time)? One kind of music? If you've heard the band in which I play, Hush Harbor, you know what kind of music I like – loud rock music. Sorry. I just do. I don't like opera, even though I tried it once. When I was in seminary, one of my roommates was in a production of *La Boheme*. At his invitation I attended one of the performances. I made it until intermission before giving up and going home. I don't like bluegrass, I don't like traditional country, and I don't like much classical. There's nothing wrong with those other styles of music; I'm just not a fan. And I know some of you are not fans of what I like, and that's okay.

Unfortunately, even simple difference as taste in music (or, in Kentucky, our choice of UofL or UK) can help to create walls between people. In the time of Paul there was a wide gulf between Jew and Gentile. It was a chasm so wide and so deep, that it seemed the very definition of impossible to bridge. The majority of members of the early church were unfamiliar with Gentile people, who were anyone not Jewish. Those who opposed the inclusion of Gentiles into the church had what they believed to be good reasons – they aren't like us, they don't talk like us, they don't eat like us, they don't observe any of the rituals and commands we observe. They found their language, culture, wardrobe, diet, and many other things about them strange and unsettling. Because of those differences they weren't sure about the Gentiles, especially as they began to pour into the church in large numbers. There was a great deal of resistance to those Gentiles. There were things said, probably along the lines of this – *they don't worship the way we do. They like a different style of music. Look at how some of them dress – is that appropriate for worship? They think kind of strange. They are trying to change the way we've always done things.* Sound familiar? *Everything old is new again*, goes the old saying.

Wall of separation are ugly, and they are especially ugly when they receive the approval of religious people against the will of God and when those walls are built in churches and places of faith, where walls should be dismantled rather than constructed.

Throughout much of the early history of God's people it was incorrectly assumed that the call to be

different meant to build a wall of protection to keep one's self safe and separate from those on the outside of the wall and to make sure that they do not manage to get inside that wall.

Even the Temple, the holiest site in all of Judaism, served as a reminder of the division between people. Not everyone was allowed in all parts of the Temple. In 1871 a rock was discovered in Jerusalem, dating to the time of Paul, that was originally a sign in the Temple. The inscription reads, *Let no foreigner enter inside the barrier and the fence around the sanctuary. Whosoever is caught will be the cause of death following as a penalty.* Not exactly a word of welcome for a place of worship! Imagine printing that on a church bulletin!

Listen to what Paul writes in verse 14 – *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.* Isn't that a beautiful sentence? *Christ has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.* In this day and age of talk about walls – real and imagined, physical and spiritual – Paul reminds us that we are not to be builders of walls. Walls are not the natural state of humanity. Walls are not the way of God or part of his creation.

2. *Walls Are Very Difficult to Dismantle.*

One of the other reasons why I chose this picture is because it shows how difficult it can be to dismantle a wall. How many of you have ever hit concrete with a sledgehammer? I have, and I can guarantee you that not much happens, especially when the concrete is full of rebar, like the wall in this picture, which is the Berlin Wall.

When I was a senior in college I was called to my first “official” church position. I was called to serve as the Youth Minister at Bethel Christian Church, a small Disciples church in Jonesboro, Tennessee. I served there for thirteen months, and it was a great experience for me, although in all honesty I have to say that it was probably a better experience for me than it was for the church, as I had very little idea what I was doing.

Bethel Christian Church is an African-American congregation, and in the late 70s, in northeast Tennessee, race relations were not always positive. On more than one occasion, when I would be out with the youth group, some harsh things would be said by passersby. One trip, to a local skating rink, was an experience I will never forget. I was going around the rink with one of the kids from the group – one of the young ladies – and after a few times around I noticed a group of young men lining up along a low wall, obviously watching us very closely. When we came off the rink, and skated between them, some very harsh language was directed to us, and I wondered – and half-expected – to be tripped or knocked down by one of them. Thankfully, progress has been made since that time, but we still have a ways to go.

As important as it is to talk about tearing down walls, we cannot forget that it is very hard work. And notice there is only one person in this picture actually tearing down the wall; the rest are spectators. Now granted, they might have been taking turns, but the reality is there are generally more observers than actual tearers-down of walls. Plenty of people will be happy to watch from the safety of the sidelines but will not join in the effort until it seems very safe.

Dismantling a wall is hard work, and it comes down bit by bit, and, unfortunately, there is always the chance that while one wall is coming down, another is being built. Sometimes it's one step forward and two or three backwards.

Dismantling walls, after all, can be dangerous. Dismantling walls was dangerous for Paul. He not only faced the disapproval of others; he faced other challenges as well. He faced a great deal of pushback, some of which was violent. It's very difficult to be the guy taking the sledgehammer – real or symbolic – to the walls that need to be dismantled. Listen to what Paul says in verse 13 – *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Brought near by the blood of Christ.* Did you catch that phrase – *brought near by the blood of Christ.* *Blood* reminds

us of the difficulty and the cost of dismantling a wall. Dismantling walls is costly. Walls are not easily removed. They were built to serve a purpose, a purpose in which many people have a vested interest.

3. *Paul Was A Champion of Dismantling Walls and Welcoming People.*

Listen again to verses 14 – 19 –

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

15 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,

16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,

There are some beautiful phrases in that passage – *who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...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...Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.*

Paul always championed the cause of inclusion. Paul, who saw himself as an ambassador of Christ to his own people, eventually moved to the mission of reaching the Gentile people with the Gospel message. His desire to reach the Gentiles put him squarely into conflict with those who opposed his work. Everywhere Paul traveled, he ran into representatives of the opposition. On more than one occasion, Paul's opponents stirred up crowds against him, often leading to physical violence against him and even arrest. But Paul was never deterred, because he knew he was doing the work of God.

When my mother-in-law lived on Tybee Island, my family and I would often visit two sites. On the northern end of the island we would visit the military bunkers that dated to the time of the Civil War. The bunkers now house a museum, and we toured the museum on many occasions. We also visit Fort Pulaski, located on a small, neighboring island. Fort Pulaski is now a national park, and began its life as a Civil War fort. The walls of the fort are very wide – at least 20 feet wide – and we would walk along the top of the walls, looking out from where the cannons once fired. There was something very pleasing about seeing that fort now as a museum of a bygone era. No longer was it a place of warfare, bombing, and conflict, but a place where the walls of war had become walls of historical curiosity. But I also know, as I walked along those walls, that while the fort's cannons had been retired and the walls no longer were purposed for exclusion, there were plenty of places where walls of separation continue to be built. The work of dismantling walls is never complete.

Perhaps walls of division will always be with us, but it doesn't mean that we have to accept them or fail to work to bring them down. We would do well, certainly, to remember the words of Paul in Galatians 3:28 – *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Those words continue to resonate powerfully in our world, and they are as needed as they ever were. While we proclaim oneness in Christ, there are those who will continue to proclaim *oh no we aren't! We are not one!*

But we are. We are one because God created us as one and proclaims his desire that we live in love and unity. Perhaps one day that great dream of God will come to fruition. Until then, we will keep on *Tearing Down Walls.*