

## The Greatest Gift of All Time

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.

The Statue of Liberty. New Jersey. The Trojan Horse. All of them gifts. But is any one of them the greatest? New Jersey. Drought-resistant wheat seeds. The Trojan Horse. The World Wide Web. Human freedom. Penicillin. A green bike. Jesus Christ. What do the items in this list, as diverse as they are, have in common? All are gifts. Maybe the greatest gifts in history. The giving of gifts is a practice, or ritual, that has existed as long as humans have lived in community. These gifts are both great and small.

New Jersey was given as a present in 1665 by the Duke of York to two royalists, Sir George Carteret and Lord Berkeley. Fortunately, the territory did not remain in their hands; it reverted to the English crown in 1702, and later became part of the United States.

Another great gift was much smaller, but was equally significant. A man named Norman Borlaug developed tiny wheat seeds that were resistant to drought and disease (see “Hope in a Seed,” *Homiletics*, June 14, 2015). These seeds were planted across Latin America and South Asia, and ended up feeding more than one billion people. They also put many

poor countries on the road to self-reliance. Clearly, good things come in small packages.

Or how about the gift, The Trojan Horse. Well, maybe it was not such a terrific present for the Trojans, since Greek soldiers hid inside the horse and then conquered the city of Troy. But the destruction of Troy led to the foundation of Rome and the Roman Empire, which had a profound effect on Western civilization.

How about the present given to the world by Tim Berners-Lee? Tim Berners-*who*, you ask? Contrary to He gave us the World Wide Web, says economist Paul Collier, choosing to make it a public good instead of a personal cash cow. The benefits to people around the world have been tremendous. [NOTE 1]

The idea of human freedom. This has been America's gift to the world, from Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr. Freedom for all people has always been the guiding light of our foreign policy. When we are true to ourselves, freedom is what America is all about.

And even more importantly, freedom is what Jesus Christ is all about -- and he is the greatest "gift of all" (see John 3:16). He is our God-and-neighbor connector, our peacemaker and our wall-breaker. Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit breaks down the walls that divide people. I pray every day for Christ to break thru He becomes for us the cornerstone of a spiritual house, one that serves as a home for us all.

The apostle Paul knows Christ's worth, which he describes in lavish detail in his letter to the Ephesians. Writing to a group of Christians who had grown up as Gentiles -- people outside the Jewish community of faith -- Paul reminds them that they were once "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). I don't know about you but that sounds like a terrible place to be. [NOTE 2]

**The problem of alienation** What did it feel like to be a Gentile in Ephesus? Hard to say. Archeology tells us only so much about what life was like for residents of this Roman city on the sun-baked coast of Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. But as we read the letter to the Ephesians, we can only try to imagine what they were going through, feeling hopeless and cut off from God. This was the situation:

In the first-century Herodian temple where the Jews worshiped, there was a series of courts separated by gated walls. Each court moved progressively closer to the Holy of Holies. The first gate was the gate of the Gentiles, and you could walk around in that court if you were a God-fearing Gentile.

If you were a Jewish woman who was ceremonially clean according to Jewish law, you could enter the next gate and go into an inner court. Beyond that lay the gate to the innermost court, where only Jewish men who were ceremonially clean could go without fear of death.

Several years ago, archaeologists found an inscription in the wall of the outermost court, the court of the Gentiles. It read, "Whoever is captured past this point will have himself to blame for his subsequent death." That's some pretty hostile language. But hostility is exactly what existed between Jew and Gentile for centuries. *The Village Church*, September 18, 2014, [thevillagechurch.net](http://thevillagechurch.net).

Paul says the Gentiles felt like aliens (v. 12). Most of us know what it feels like to be alienated -- removed, withdrawn and/or estranged from a community and from God. I remember what it felt like to feel like an outsider when my friends were talking about their parties and went out of their way to try to make me feel bad for not attending their drinking parties. Most of us can relate in one way or another. [NOTE 3]

Today, alienation can be caused by too much of a reliance on technology. Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, believes that social media can isolate us and cause much more harm than good. She has written a book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, and in it she talks about how we have so many opportunities to communicate today, using emails, texts, instant messages, Facebook messages, Twitter messages, phone calls, Instagram, Skype, and Facetime.

Such light-speed communication is great for making links. Which is good. But, unfortunately, as we get bombarded by messages and make hurried responses, the content of our conversations gets dumbed down. Even with emojis there is much miscommunication. Conversation with depth and meaning -- the kind of thing that connects us as humans -- often gets lost. We find ourselves linked by technology, but, often (as a consequence) feel alienated, estranged from community and from God. Alone. Cut off. Isolated. Even in the middle of a bustling city. [NOTE 4]

One of my best friends wrote a song in the mid 80's, even before these technologies had really taken off that contains the line, "Sittin' alone, with all of my friends." Anybody ever felt like that? Yeah, me too. That's why human fellowship is important. That is why nobody grows in faith and practice apart from other Christ-followers.

*Alone, cut off, isolated ... This was how the Ephesians were feeling, almost 2,000 years before the invention of the Internet. But fortunately their lives were transformed by the gift of Jesus, who became their God-and-neighbor-connector. Paul tells them that their alienation is over, for "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13). Through the death of Jesus we are forgiven and restored to right relationships with God and our neighbors. **The gift that connects** The cross was a symbol of torture and pain, but God transformed it and now it is a symbol of connectedness. The sacrifice of Jesus brings separated parties together, and the cross itself serves as a symbol of this victory. Just look at the structure of the cross: The *vertical* beam is a symbol of the new connection between people and God, and the *horizontal* beam points to the connection between people, one to another. Through Christ, those who were "far off" and separated by sin have been "brought near" and united through forgiveness. [NOTE 5]*

Christ is our *peace-maker and our wall-breaker*, says Paul, "in his flesh he has made both groups into one" (v. 14). Christ makes peace between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, between black Americans and white Americans, between Baby Boomers and Millennials, between immigrants and the native-born, breaking down "the dividing wall, the barriers, the hostility between us" (v. 14).

Hostility between different groups leads to separation, but walls break down when

we identify ourselves primarily as Christians, as disciples of Christ, as Christ-followers and members of his body. Today, on campuses across the United States, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is trying to become more racially and ethnically inclusive. Members are stressing racial reconciliation in large-group meetings for praise and worship, small-group Bible studies, and summer camps for leadership training. Their focus is not on political correctness, but on the Bible: Leaders point to Jesus' prayer in John 17 that his followers would all be one, and to Paul's words in Ephesians about Christ breaking down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile. [NOTE 6]

Racial reconciliation is now part of the training for campus staff, with the goal that it will become part of ongoing small-group meetings. The objective, according to Paul Fuller, an InterVarsity vice president and director of multiethnic ministries, is "to create witnessing communities on campus that are growing in love for every ethnicity." And it is not just happening on college campuses. There is a group called KC Underground that has simply made following Jesus and His Way, a priority. They equip and empower ordinary people to pray and fast, listen and obey Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. They equip and empower people to simply be fully present and act like missionaries in their own context to share meals and have conversations with people and invite them to become a Christ-follower. To be a Christ-follower you need to become a disciple-making disciple. There is no room for, and no Biblical example of, a passive, sit-on-the-sidelines Christ follower. KC Underground is exploring and finding ways to make racial reconciliation and unity in Christ a major thing. Growing in love. Not just for our own ethnic group, but for *every* ethnicity. That comes only from seeing Christ as our peacemaker and wall-breaker. [NOTE 7]

Paul tells us that Jesus is also *the cornerstone of a spiritual house, one that serves as a home for us all*. "In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (vv. 21-22). What a gift this is! -In this house, we have access "in one Spirit" to God the Father (v. 18).

- In this house, we "are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (v. 19).

- In this house, we know that we are resting on something solid, "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (v. 20).

We live in an *uncertain* world, in which generous gifts can be taken away, such as when the gift of New Jersey suddenly reverted to the royal family. We live in a dangerous world, in which gifts such as The Trojan Horse turn out to be curses in disguise. We live in an *ambiguous* world, in which innovations such as the World Wide Web can be used to disseminate both digital treasures as well as digital trash, a medium for hate, propaganda, and evil. [NOTE 8]

None of this is true with the greatest gift of all time, Jesus Christ. He connects us to God and neighbor, makes peace, breaks down walls and offers us an eternal home with God. Jesus is the gift that keeps on giving, as we grow in love for God and

neighbor as members of his spiritual household.

Hold on to this gift. It will maintain its value forever.

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**Sermon Notes for "The Greatest Gift of All-Time"**  
**Based on Ephesians 2:11-22 given in Doster September 25, 2022**

- I. Freedom is what Jesus Christ is all about -- and he is the greatest "gift of all" (see John 3:16). He is our God-and-neighbor connector, our peacemaker and our wall-breaker. He becomes for us the cornerstone of a spiritual house, one that serves as a home for us all.
- II. Writing to a group of Christians who had grown up as Gentiles -- people outside the Jewish community of faith -- Paul reminds them that they were once "without Christ," being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12)
- III. Conversations with depth and meaning -- the kind of thing that connects us as humans -- often gets lost. We find ourselves linked by technology, but, often (as a consequence) feel alienated, estranged from community and from God
- IV. Paul says their alienation is over, for "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13). Through the death of Jesus Christ we are forgiven and restored to right relationships with God and our neighbors.
- V. Just look at the structure of the cross: The *vertical* beam is a symbol of the new connection between people and God, and the *horizontal* beam points to the connection between people. Through Christ, those who were "far off" and separated by sin have been "brought near" and united through forgiveness.
- VI. Walls break down when we identify ourselves primarily as Christ-followers, as disciples, and members of His body. We need to point to Jesus' prayer in John 17 that his followers would all be one, and to Paul's words in Ephesians about Christ breaking down the walls.
- VII. Paul tells us that Jesus is also *the cornerstone of a spiritual house, one that serves as a home for us all*. "In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (vv. 21-22).
- VIII. Christians can agree that the greatest gift is Jesus, Himself, who, as this text points out, is the One who brings us all together in unity.