

Introduction

While we were in Mexico we took a trip to Chichén Itzá, a vast and immense city of the ancient Mayans. We learned a great deal about the Mayans from our tour guide, Johnny Depp (he went by the name Llalo, but whatever). While the city had been damaged as the jungle overtook it for five centuries, it was largely intact for it was abandoned before it could be destroyed by invaders.

In the early 1500s a group of soldiers arrived from Spain. Johnny—er, Llalo explained they quickly learned the Aztecs were the oppressive power in the area. While the Mayans were superior in knowledge and understanding, the Aztecs had greater military power and oppressed all the people groups around them, placing heavy taxes on them.

While the Spanish conquistadors were only 2,000 strong, they combined forces with the various nations around the Aztecs to defeat the Aztecs. They burned their cities and destroyed their writings. In short order the Aztec culture and civilization were completely wiped out. The Spanish had all the gold and treasure they had been seeking.

They quickly turned on their allies, for they, too, had gold and jewels. They would destroy everything when they conquered but when they arrived at the mighty city of Chichén Itzá—the capital city of the Mayans—they found the city abandoned. The Mayans who lived there knew what was coming and chose to simply disappear into the surrounding jungle, leaving their beautiful city empty.

The Mayan people are still around, easily identifiable by their physical appearance. Llalo explained that still today they are an oppressed people in Mexico, often working jobs no one else will. Even in the Yucatan peninsula, where tourism *is* the economy, those of Mayan descent rarely have public-facing roles. Instead, they are relegated to menial jobs that are generally out of sight. As a people group they are substantially poorer than other ethnic groups. In 2021 the nation of Mexico formally apologized to the Mayan peoples for abuses committed against them for more than five centuries, abuses that continue still today.

Such ethnic hostility is hardly unique to Mexico. We see it throughout our nation's history, whether abuses against black folk or against Native Americans. February 19 marked the anniversary of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which forced Americans of Japanese descent to be rounded up and forcibly detained in camps built for this purpose. Many of these Americans lost their homes and their businesses, their property, their savings. It was just taken away because their ancestors were from Japan.

Years ago I worked with a man who had three college roommates—all three were from Korea. Two of them he described as brilliant, extremely intelligent. The third was not stupid in any sense; he was simply not *brilliant*. Again, all three were from South Korea. The two more intelligent guys constantly referred to the third Korean as “the Japanese kid”. For them, the biggest insult for this young man of at least average intelligence was to call him Japanese.

In Saudi Arabia over 10,000,000 foreigners account for *more than half its workforce*, with many coming from South Asia. Those of Indian descent in particular are relegated to menial tasks and domestic work. The organization Human Rights Watch says many of these foreign workers work in “near-slavery” due to the ethnic hostility against them.

There seems to be something inherent in human nature that creates in us an “us versus them” mentality. This mentality results in ethnic hostility—hostility toward those who are different from us in superficial ways—in-the-flesh ways. Superficial differences have continued to divide people from the earliest days of human history. We’re going to see this morning that God’s solution to ethnic hostility is the gospel of Jesus. Let me be very clear on a couple points right up front. First, ending ethnic hostility does not require ending ethnic identity. God does not desire the erasure of distinct ethnic and cultural expressions. Second, the gospel isn’t good news if it allows ethnic hostility to remain.

This morning we’re going to see how Paul addresses the issue of ethnic hostility in his letter to the Ephesians. We will see that it is only the gospel of Jesus that can solve the issue, for Jesus came, in part, to end ethnic hostility. We’re in Ephesians 2, verse 11.

^{Eph 2:11} Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands...

Ephesians 2:11

The Beginning

From the beginning, going all the way back to Mount Sinai where the descendants of Abraham received the covenant from God, the “people of Israel” were a mixed group of people. This mix was promised directly to Abraham.

^{Gen 12:3} I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Genesis 12:3

The blessing promised to Abraham was a blessing that was intended to spread to all the families of the earth. That is, every tribe and people and language and nation were to be included in this blessing. Everyone was invited to join the people of God from the beginning. Abraham’s descendants understood this when they were leaving Egypt in the exodus. We’re told there were 600,000 men, plus women and children, *and*

^{Ex 12:38} A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.

Exodus 12:38

A mixed multitude of people left Egypt with them. Egypt at the time was one of the world’s three largest economic powers, along with Hatti to the north of Canaan and Mesopotamia. International trade was quite common, which means foreign people lived among the Egyptians just as the Israelites did. Whether these foreigners were also oppressed

by the Egyptians or not, they saw what the God of Israel did to Egypt and chose to leave Egypt with them. At Mount Sinai they received the covenant as well. That is, they became true Israelites, despite their ethnic origins. We see further evidence of this in God's promise to Abraham.

In Genesis 15 God makes a covenant with Abraham and promises him the land of Canaan, where numerous people groups were, including a group called the Kenizzites. After the exodus from Egypt Moses sent twelve spies into the land of Canaan, one spy from each of the twelve tribes. Sadly, Israel rebelled against God and refused to enter the land immediately, for fear of the people in the land. In response God declared that this entire generation would die in the wilderness, with two exceptions. He said that none would enter the land,

Num 32:12 ...none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua
the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the LORD.”
Numbers 32:12

The representative of the entire tribe of Judah was Caleb, a *Kenizzite*. Judah was Israel's most prominent tribe and the man chosen to represent them was of the people who occupied the land! He was in every way an Israelite, for he worshiped the God of Israel and his ethnic background was no barrier to being among the people of God.

We see this same reality centuries later in Israel. Among David's "Mighty Men"—his closest companions and fellow warriors—were Uriah *the Hittite*, who was from Hatti, and Ittai *the Gittite*, who was from Gath. Gath is where Goliath was from, which means Ittai was a Philistine. What were a Philistine and a Hittite doing so close to David? *They had become part of Israel*, just like Caleb and just like Rahab. Not only had Rahab been a harlot, she was a Canaanite, yet she married the son of the most prominent man in the tribe of Judah, and Judah was the most prominent tribe in all Israel. To say this another way, Rahab the Canaanite married the most eligible bachelor in all Israel.

Centuries later Ruth was a Moabite woman who married a man of Judah. When he died she traveled back to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law and eventually married an Israelite named Boaz. Both of these *foreign* women were ancestors of Jesus himself. Israel understood they were a mixed people and always were supposed to be a mixed people. Something changed in Israel's understanding, however. By the time they began to return from exile, the "Torah of Moses", or the "Teaching of Moses" had become the "Law of Moses". Rather than God's commands being God's self-revelation, they had become a list of rules to follow to the letter. We see this on full display in Nehemiah.

Neh 13:3 As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all
those of foreign descent.
Nehemiah 13:3

There is no indication those they separated worshiped false gods. They were simply "foreigners". Like Rahab. Like Ruth. Like Caleb. Like the mixed multitude who joined the descendants of Abraham at Mount Sinai and together received the covenant from the Lord. Like David's Mighty Men. Their understanding of "the Law" and their attitude toward the nations had so completely changed that it was unrecognizable from just a century earlier.

A letter was written in the second-century BC that functioned like a history of the people of Israel. It describes the process by which they translated the Scriptures into Greek. This letter reflects the popular understanding of most Jews in the early first century, for even if they had not read the letter, they swam in its essence. The view reflected in the letter explains the ethnic hostility they had toward the other nations.

Now our Lawgiver being a wise man and specially endowed by God to understand all things, took a comprehensive view of each particular detail, and fenced us round with impregnable fortifications and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations, but remain pure in body and soul, free from all vain imaginations, worshiping the one Almighty God above the whole creation.

Letter of Aristeas 139

No longer was the Torah of God his self-revelation. Now it was his law, his *legislation*, and rather than rescuing them from Egypt that the *Egyptians* might know him as Exodus says, they believed he gave the *Law* to Israel to keep the nations from knowing him.

In the Flesh

In our text Paul begins by addressing the vast majority of Ephesian Christians. If we had a detailed demographic of the whole church across the world at this time, it would be overwhelmingly Jewish. The vast majority of the first Christians were Jews who received their Messiah, whether during his earthly ministry or after his resurrection. They recognize who he is and believe in him and follow him and worship him as the God of Israel now in human form. The church in Ephesus was largely a Gentile congregation.

The word “Gentile” is the word from which we get the word “ethnic”. τὰ ἔθνη were the nations—the non-Jewish nations. We immediately see the impact of the dominant culture in the global church at that time. Again, the vast majority of Christians were Jews, and the Jews saw the world divided into two groups. On the one hand were the Jews. In the Roman empire they were a tiny minority, yet they saw the world from their own perspective. There were the Jews and on the other hand there were the nations—the Gentiles.

Paul acknowledges they were Gentiles. He’s not writing to a church of Jewish folk, but a church that was predominantly not Jewish. He adds a clarification, however: they were “Gentiles in the flesh”. On one level he’s saying their Gentile-ness is only *skin deep*. It’s a superficial identity. On a much deeper level, however, he’s making a more significant claim. Their status as Gentiles is only a status that mere humans recognize. To say this another way, being a Gentile is not something God regards as a legitimate category for deciding who is in and who is out.

The problem for many Jews in the first century is they had come to believe that God’s grace in choosing them as his holy nation made them superior to the rest of the nations. They thought their status conferred on them an actual superiority to others. They forgot that this same grace that made them God’s people was available to any who would worship the God of Israel. Anyone who would worship the one true God was welcome to join the

people of Israel. Even further, they forgot they themselves were a mixed people group from the very beginning.

Paul reminds these believers of the time they were “Gentiles in the flesh” and reminds them they were called “the uncircumcision”. Notice the ESV renders the phrase “the uncircumcision” in quotation marks. This is meant to indicate that’s not really what the text says. It’s what the underlying text *means* but it’s not the actual word Paul uses. He says, “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called *foreskins*”. That is, they still had foreskins.

It’s not difficult to see why they would be called this, and by whom. The Jews had come to see the world as those who were Jewish and those who were not. Those who were not could be easily identified by a single detail: they were uncircumcised. In the Greek mind, the unblemished human form was ideal and they believed circumcision was a blemish.

The word Paul uses—foreskins—was used as an ethnic slur by the Jews to describe Gentile men. It doesn’t take a lot of effort to understand that being a Greek or a Roman man and being called *a foreskin* would be a bit offensive. The closest parallel I can think of today is the N-word. While it originally was descriptive, it very quickly became an ethnic slur to describe an entire people group. It was an insult. A pejorative.

Paul says the Gentiles were *called* this and then he names those who call them this slur: “by what is called the circumcision”. Notice there are no quotes around circumcision here. This is because it’s the actual word. The Jews were those who were circumcised. This practice of circumcision had its origin with Abraham. When God appeared to Abraham he gave him a sign for the covenant he made with him: he and his male offspring must be circumcised. This circumcision would mark them out as those in the covenant.

Later when God gave the covenant to Abraham’s physical descendants combined with the mixed multitude at Mount Sinai, they received further instructions about circumcision. Here again circumcision was to be a sign they were in the covenant with God. It had *spiritual significance*. It meant something. Notice our text again.

Eph 2:11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “foreskins” by what is called the circumcision, *which is made in the flesh by hands...*

Ephesians 2:11

The circumcision the Jews practiced was *made in the flesh by hands*, Paul says. This would have been shocking to any Jew in the first century. They believed their status as God’s holy nation made them superior, and what marked them out as God’s special people was circumcision, along with eating kosher and keeping Sabbath. Here Paul destroys any basis for a sense of superiority. Their circumcision was just as shallow and superficial as the Gentiles’ lack of circumcision!

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Philippi, which was a thoroughly *Roman* city. Even in Paul’s day the dominant language there was Latin. The Jewish population there would have been extremely small. This means the vast majority of the Christians were Gentiles who had not been circumcised, yet Paul could say this to them:

Phil 3:3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...

Philippians 3:3

That is, circumcision was always meant to point God's people to an inner transformation that was necessary and while the Philippians were not physically circumcised, they were nevertheless those who had transformed hearts. They were the *true* circumcision.

Physical circumcision has no bearing on one's status before the Lord. It does not—and cannot—indicate whether there is faith in Jesus. It does not—and cannot—indicate one's status before the Lord. This is because the new covenant ushered in by Jesus has transformed the markers of Jewish identity into mere cultural expressions. The real sign of the new covenant is the presence and activity of God's Spirit.

A New Covenant

After quoting Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant in Hebrews 8, the author said this:

Heb 8:13 In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Hebrews 8:13

The “first one” is the covenant given at Mount Sinai. It is the Mosaic, or the Old Covenant. This covenant was the Ten Commandments. The covenant described God's character—his commandments are his self-revelation—and told Israel the right response to God's character. Don't murder, but not because a rule says you can't; don't murder because God would never take a life unjustly. Don't mix cotton and wool in your clothing, but not because there is something inherently wrong about it. Don't mix your fibers so you learn that God is holy and cannot mix with that which is unholy *so be holy*.

That same self-revelation commanded his people to circumcise their sons on the eighth day. There is nothing inherently holy in circumcision. God was showing his people that he is unlike any other being in existence and his people need to be likewise different—but not merely in their flesh. They must be distinct in their character, in their manner of life. We must be holy because God is holy.

When Jesus ushered in the new covenant through his death and resurrection, Hebrews says he made the old covenant obsolete. That is, it is no longer binding on God's people. Let me say this another way: the new covenant makes the old covenant a cultural expression. Those of Jewish descent who follow Jesus can still circumcise their sons as an expression of their Jewishness. They can still eat kosher as an expression of their Jewishness. They can still observe the Sabbath as an expression of their Jewishness. What they cannot do is claim their Jewishness makes them superior. What they cannot do is insist that Gentiles who follow Jesus must embrace Jewishness in order to be full-fledged members of the new covenant in Christ.

When Paul says the Gentiles were pejoratively called foreskins by those who were circumcised, he says they were circumcised *in the flesh*. That is, their cultural expression was different from that of the Gentiles, and that's okay! Their cultural expression is merely skin deep—literally. It is a superficial distinction. The Gentiles do not need to embrace Jewish culture and the Jews do not need to embrace Gentile culture. It is important that we see why. Here's Paul's point.

Eph 2:11 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “foreskins” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Ephesians 2:11–18

Remember the Letter of Aristeas claimed the Law of Moses was “an impregnable fortification” and gave Israel “walls of iron” to keep out the nations. As Dave showed us last week, in the temple mount there was a literal wall keeping the Gentiles away from the temple proper. This wall has been torn down by the blood of Jesus, for his blood abolishes the law of commandments. The new covenant in his blood makes the old one obsolete. His purpose, the good news of his coming, was that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace. Do you see how the gospel of Jesus is the end of ethnic hostility? This is why he came. It’s not the only reason he came, but it’s why he came. The blood of Jesus and his cross *kills the hostility*.

It does this by replacing the “law” written on tablets of stone with an inner transformation by the Spirit. As Jeremiah put it, in the new covenant the Spirit of God writes God’s laws on the hearts of his people and the Spirit causes them to obey. This is because the Spirit transforms God’s people from the inside out. The law of Moses had come to be seen as changing from the outside in, beginning with circumcision, observing Sabbath, and eating kosher.

The End of Hostility

The glory of God in the face of Christ through his Spirit is seen in the reconciliation of his people both in the vertical—between God and his people—and in the horizontal. One significant way our reconciliation to God is demonstrated is in our horizontal reconciliation. When God saves us, he saves us by forgiving our sins and giving us access to the Father and putting his Spirit within us, but this necessarily includes our transformation, and our transformation necessarily involves our reconciliation to one another.

It would be easy at this point to think solely in terms of racial hostility, for race can be a significant part of ethnic hostility. It includes skin color, but ethnicity is so much more. Ethnicity is any characteristic or characteristics that a group believes unites them together and makes them distinct from everyone else. This is often common ancestry or traditions. It could be social class. Two people may have gone to the same college and graduated with the same degree and work in the same field but be part of two very different ethnic groups

if one grew up in wealth and the other grew up in poverty. How they tend to see the world will be vastly different because of this and this difference can cause division.

I know I harp on this one, and I will continue to do so until it stops being a problem, but another significant source of hostility in our world is the great chasm that politics is. When it comes to racism and prejudice our culture has shifted just enough that much of it remains either unstated or simply ignored for most recognize there are things that should not be said in “polite company”. There are blatant and obvious racists, of course, but for most racists it’s more understated. Not so when it comes to politics.

When it comes to politics so many, including those who claim to be followers of Jesus, are willing to spew anti-other-party rhetoric and question the motives and character of any who will dare disagree with them. It is the ultimate “us versus them” in our culture. As both of the major parties continue to cater to their fringes, this divide is only growing.

Much of this has been driven by talk radio and the 24-hour news channels and more recently social media. These didn’t *create* the divide; they merely exacerbated our tendencies to fight for our tribe, for our group, *for those who are just like us*. When truly believed, the gospel of Jesus destroys this division. Consider Paul’s words to the Colossians.

Col 3:11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.
Colossians 3:11

He says here—in *the church*—the things that normally divide people into hostile groups simply do not divide us. Look carefully at the categories. First, there is not Greek and Jew. These are distinct ancestries that often result in very different cultures. This is all-encompassing for it includes language and history and food and values. Though we come from different backgrounds, in the church these things do not divide us.

Here—in the church—there is not circumcised and uncircumcised. This is a religious background. Whether you came from a Christian home it quite probably is not from the same tradition as others who grew up in a Christian home. Some of you were baptized as infants and some were baptized as professing believers. Some of you grew up waiting for “the rapture” and some of you grew up understanding you’re living in the kingdom now. Still others did not grow up with any real Christian influence in the home. Here there is no division based on religious background.

Here—in the church—there is not barbarian and Scythian. In the Roman mind barbarians were any peoples who were not Roman. The word for barbarian mimics what the Romans thought their languages sounded like: “bar bar bar bar”. Rough and uncouth. Uncultured. *Uncivilized*. Then there were the Scythians. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus said the Scythians were so very barbaric, so very uneducated, so very violent that they were hard to distinguish from wild animals. The Scythians were so very barbaric they made ordinary barbarians look like a member of King Charles’ court having high tea at Buckingham palace. Christ unites even barbarians and Scythians in his church.

Here—in the church—there is not slave and free. In the first century these were largely socio-economic classes, for many sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt or were prisoners of war and most slaves could expect freedom by the age of 30 or so. We don’t have slave and free today, but we have rich and poor.

One of the biggest cultural gaps we experience is between that of rich and poor. More than anything else one's economic status shapes his or her understanding of the world, whether the kinds of foods to eat or the expectation of housing or where vacations are taken—or if they are taken—or what sort of clothing to purchase and where to purchase from. It affects the cars we drive, the books we read, the things we tend to find interesting in the world, if only from a difference in exposure due to resources available to us in our childhood.

Jesus came to end the hostility between people and unite them together in his church. This is the gospel Paul preached. There's more to this gospel, but there is not less.

Application

Over the last few years we've experienced significant growth. This growth seems to be continuing as every week there are new faces I don't recognize and new people I haven't yet met. Many visit with family or friends and many visit looking for a church to call home. Because I don't know how else to be, let me very direct to our visitors, to our newer folk, and to those who've been here from the beginning.

If you are looking for a church that will affirm your particular political view and advocate for your particular political party, I'm very sorry, but you will have to keep looking. We do not exist to promote any particular nation or any particular political view within that nation.

If you are looking for a church that will affirm your particular cultural expression, I'm very sorry, but you will have to keep looking. We desire a more integrated worship style. As I've said from the beginning, however, if five jazz musicians volunteer to lead worship, it doesn't matter what style you ask them to play: it's gonna swing a little. We do not exist to promote any particular cultural expression, including music style.

If you are looking for a church that offers you the sort of buffet-style ministries you are used to, ministries that segregate the church by age and life experience, I'm very sorry, but you will have to keep looking. God intends his church to be a united whole that together, *with one voice*, glorifies him. We'll keep providing nursery for our moms and an age-appropriate class for the younger kids, but your kids need to be around believers who take following Jesus seriously. Not only do we need those of different cultural expressions and ethnic backgrounds and such, we need those of different ages to speak into our lives.

If you are looking for a church that offers you any sort of platform for whatever you happen to be promoting, especially if you are the one you are promoting, I'm sorry, but you will have to keep looking. We do not exist to promote any individuals or causes save for that which fulfills our mission.

If you are looking for a church that affirms your particular sin by ignoring it while pronouncing judgment on the sins of others who sin differently from you, I'm very sorry, but you will have to keep looking. We do not exist to make anyone feel particularly comfortable in sins that are more culturally acceptable, whether greed or arrogance or pride or laziness or immorality or whatever else.

Now, if you are looking for a church that proclaims the gospel of Jesus and seeks to elevate him and only him, *welcome home*. If you are looking for a church that recognizes its unity as a people is rooted entirely in who Jesus is and what he has done, *welcome home*. If you are looking for a church that values one another, that cares for one another, that

seeks to help one another follow Jesus by living lives of holiness, *welcome home*. If you are looking for a church that seeks to integrate your particular cultural expression, and not merely assimilate it, *welcome home*. Listen: it won't always be a smooth ride. We make mistakes. We also—sometimes publicly—admit our mistakes.

What you and I need in this world of ethnic hostility, of social hostility, of political hostility, of racial hostility is the very thing the gospel of Jesus offers. You need an identity that is not rooted in your sexuality or in your economic status or in your political views. You need an identity that is not merely skin deep and is not directly tied to your present or prior or even future circumstances. What you need is the identity offered by the Lord Jesus that is rooted entirely in who he is and what he has done, for the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The church of Jesus Christ reminds us of this for we are prone to forget.