

## **Remove That Wall between the Jews and the Gentiles!**

Acts 10:9-20

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God erects walls for your protection and also tears down walls for your reconciliation. When Nehemiah rebuilt and restored the walls that surrounded Jerusalem, it was to protect God's people from the enemies outside that hated them and would destroy them. Likewise, the truth found in Holy Scripture (and summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith) is a wall that protects you from the enemies within and without that hate you and that would destroy you.

However, not all walls are for your good and protection. Some walls actually keep you from being reconciled to God and to one another. Our unrepentant sins will build walls. Pride in exalting yourself and putting others down by your critical spirit will build walls between us and the Lord and between us and others (whereas loving encouragement and a word of thanks tear down such walls). Loving this world (its favor, its pleasures, its wealth, and its comforts) more than you love the Lord Jesus will build walls between you and Christ. Breaking the Sabbath by pursuing your own pleasures rather than the pleasure of God will build walls between you and the God of your salvation.

Dear ones, part of growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ is knowing what walls are meant for your protection and safety and to embrace those walls; and knowing what walls keep you from your Savior and from fellowship with one another (within your home and within Christ's Church) and to tear down those walls. The Lord originally built a wall between Jews and Gentiles under the Old Covenant, but one of the exciting truths about the New Covenant is that Jesus Christ appeared in order to tear down that wall in the New Covenant. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Wall Built by God between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:9-14); (2) The Wall Destroyed by God between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:15-20).

### **I. The Wall Built by God between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:9-14).**

A. In the previous sermon (from Acts 10:1-8), we saw how God was preparing Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman centurion, through a vision to send for the Apostle Peter that it might be made clear in God's perfect time that Gentiles were to be included as fellow members and citizens in the same Church of Jesus Christ along with Jews (not a Jewish Church—not a Samaritan Church—not a Gentile Church).

1. This was a "mystery" (a truth not fully revealed and understood) by even the Jewish apostles of Jesus Christ in the early years after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, but it was certainly hinted at in the words of Jesus to His apostles just before His ascension in Acts 1:8 (to which we have referred many times). This transformation of the Church of Jesus Christ (from a Jewish Church to a Jewish-Samaritan-Gentile Church) was earthshaking and one which even the apostles of Jesus Christ did not see, but had to be taught and persuaded by God through divine revelation.

2. We have a birds-eye view of God's preparation of this earthshaking event in Acts 10—first a vision to Cornelius, and second a vision to Peter. The servants of Cornelius were sent on their way to bring Peter in response to the vision given to Cornelius, but Peter was not ready to return with them to the house of an unclean Gentile until God had prepared him by a vision. But as we shall see, at the precise moment the servants of Cornelius were nearing the house in which Peter lodged, God was doing a work in Peter to change him and prepare him for this introduction of Gentiles into the Visible Church of Jesus Christ.

B. As our text begins, the servants of Cornelius having left the home of Cornelius in Caesarea were now approaching Joppa where Peter was lodging in the house of Simon the Tanner (Acts 10:9).

1. The excitement mounts because Peter is definitely not ready to receive them as they near the city. Why? Because he is a clean Jew and they are unclean Gentiles with whom they were not to socialize. So the Lord has work to do in Peter's heart, which He will do at just the right moment and not a second too late, so that Peter is prepared to go with these men to the home of Cornelius at the exact time they arrive at the gate to the house.

2. Oh, the perfect timing of the Lord! How we are in need of God's work of trust in Him, patiently waiting upon Him, calling upon Him to change the heart of your husband or wife, parent or child, friend or co-worker (or changing your heart or mine). Do we really believe we puny, ignorant children actually know better than the Lord the right time and best time for this plan or that plan to be realized in our life? We may want to wait, but the Lord says it is now time (I'm sure Peter would have been of that mind). Or we may want to get going now, but the Lord says it is time to wait. Dear ones, He knows the end from the beginning and has it all worked out. Rest in His peace and pray that you might rest in His heavenly peace.

C. Peter goes to the roof top to pray and while he is there praying, the Lord gives him a vision/revelation (Acts 10:9). This is a vision that will alter the course of history (that is how important this vision was that Peter received). This vision is our salvation and introduction into the Visible Church of Jesus Christ. Note, dear ones, that God revealed to Cornelius His will while Cornelius was praying, and God revealed to Peter His will while Peter was praying. Do you think God is telling us something important here? We are most likely to understand the will of God revealed in Scripture and to submit to the will of God revealed in providence when our hearts are in prayer in humbly seeking His face (not my will but thine be done—when we turn from fighting God to fighting our stubborn will and submit to His will, God's will is often made clear).

D. As Peter is praying, he grows hungry, and the Lord gives him a vision of animals brought down before him from heaven in a "sheet" (actually the fabric of a sail—Acts 10:11). These were not just any animals, but we gather from Peter's response that these were animals that Peter had never eaten, even when he was very hungry (in Acts 10:13-14). Why?

1. These were unclean animals (Acts 10:14). God had prohibited Israel to eat these animals under the administration of the Covenant of Grace in the Old Covenant (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). These animals were designated by God as unclean, not because there was something immoral or repugnant in themselves about these animals that God despised; but because God was setting boundaries that distinguished God's people Israel from idolatrous Gentile nations that surrounded them.

2. Just as God forbade Israel to eat certain animals, so God also forbade Israel to socialize with certain idolatrous nations all around them. To socialize with these idolatrous nations would lead to giving and receiving sons and daughters in sinful and unlawful marriages, and would then lead to the one true religion of Jehovah being compromised and perverted in subsequent generations. It was not that God despised and hated these Gentile nations for simply being Gentile nations. It was because these nations were idolatrous, godless, and immoral.

3. Thus, God set Israel apart in such a way that they could not eat the unclean food of the Gentile nations and could not therefore socialize with them around that food. These dietary laws were God's way to build a wall so as to keep His people pure and separate from the godless nations around them—it's not that the food itself was polluted or unhealthy in itself (otherwise we will have a problem with God making all foods clean to eat in the New Covenant as we shall see in a moment). However, this wall of dietary restrictions established by God sinfully led the Jews to embrace a national self-righteousness and pride in themselves to such an extent that the Gentiles became filthy "dogs" to them.

4. The Jews came to identify the dietary laws and ceremonial laws that were visible signs

of their separation from the world as that which made them righteous before God. But God did not love Israel because it was a godly and obedient nation, but simply because He set His love upon them and graciously chose them to be His, even though they were rebellious and stubborn (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). Thus, it was not faith in God's Messiah that was to come that was their salvation, but rather it was obedience to the dietary law, to the Sabbath, to circumcision that was their righteousness—it was being the physical descendants of Abraham that was their salvation. This was the mere outward obedience that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees (Luke 18:9-14) and that Paul condemned as a false gospel in those false teachers in Galatia (Galatians 2:16).

5. All you who hear me right now, reflect on what you are trusting in for your righteousness before God (whether your baptism, your profession of faith, some experience you have had, church membership, instead of being a Jew, you are a Covenanter—this is no different from the Pharisee in that parable of Jesus—you will never be justified before God on the basis of your own righteousness—it can only condemn you—only the perfect righteousness of Christ can justify you).

6. God Himself was the one who built that wall of separation between Israel and the Gentile nations to protect them at that time from socializing in and partaking of the idolatry, false religion, and immorality of those people. God set His love upon His people and called them to be faithful to Himself. Dear ones, let us never forget that though the dietary laws are abolished, nevertheless the same moral principles yet apply to believers under the New Covenant—God's commandments and truth are a wall of protection to you that you might yet be a holy people to God (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Dear ones, you must, therefore be careful that there be a wall built so that you do not become like the world in which you live (you are in this world, but not of this world). Your social contacts with unbelievers must not be to be liked by them, or to be applauded by them, or to be swept off your feet by their pleasures or their possessions, but rather your social contact with unbelievers should be to shine the light of the gospel and to glorify your Father who is in heaven. But how will we be used to draw them to Christ if there is no difference between them and us in our speech, conduct, or outward appearance (but especially in our trust in and devotion to Jesus Christ and all of His truth revealed in Scripture)?

E. So when the divine voice from heaven commands Peter to kill and eat (Acts 10:13), Peter is repulsed and declares, "Not so, Lord" (i.e. "certainly not" or "by no means"). Peter tells the living God in effect, "No way, God."

1. This was not the first time Peter told the Lord "No" (Matthew 16:21-23; Matthew 26:31,33-35). The response of Peter reveals how deeply embedded were the Old Covenant dietary laws in Peter's religious practices—He even tells the Lord, "No". I'm always amazed at the Lord's patience with Peter and the other disciples, because it gives me hope of God's continued patience with me. The Lord rebukes Peter, but does not consume him with his all-consuming wrath.

2. Dear ones, we do the same thing when we willfully do that which we know to be contrary to the revealed will of God (godly and loving leadership in the home, humble submission in the home, profaning the Sabbath day, observing holy days that are not appointed by God in His Word, setting wicked images before our eyes, worrying and fretting about the future etc.).

## **II. The Wall Destroyed by God between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:15-20).**

A. So we have seen that God built that wall of dietary law around His people, Israel, under the Old Covenant, but now we see that He also has the sovereign right and authority to tear down that wall in Jesus Christ as one aspect of our liberty in Christ under the New Covenant. For we read that the divine voice from heaven declares all unclean foods of the Old Covenant to be now clean in the New Covenant (Acts 10:15; Mark

7:14-23—it is not what we eat that defiles us, but that which comes from an evil heart—Ephesians 2:14-15; Colossians 2:20-22; 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

1. What God cleanses, do not call unclean—the wall God tears down, do not rebuild again (Galatians 2:18—how much more true is it when we rebuild what God has destroyed). This happens when professing Christians want to rebuild the wall destroyed by returning to Jewish worship (feast days of the Old Testament, dietary laws of the Old Testament, etc.). Or worse yet when professing Christians build new walls of worship (singing man-made hymns) and holy days (like Christmas and Easter) that God never built at all in His Word. This would apply to all aspects of that wall that pertain to the Jewish ceremonies of the Old Covenant. It is not a faithful Christian who returns to his/her Jewish roots to rebuild the Jewish ceremonies and dietary laws that God has destroyed; it is a Christian returning to the childhood stage of the Church under the Old Covenant (Galatians 4). And to require those Old Covenant ceremonies or dietary laws in addition to faith in Christ is the Galatian heresy against which the Apostle Paul preached.

2. Although **the immediate reference** in Acts 10 is to the animals that Peter was called to kill and to eat, **the ultimate reference** was to the Gentiles to whom God was to send Peter as we shall see in the sermon next Lord's Day. It is one thing to refrain from certain foods for health reasons (no problem—we have that freedom; it is another thing to refrain from certain foods for religious reasons when God has cleansed all foods). But God is infinitely more concerned about the souls of people than He is about food—Gentile souls as well as Jewish souls. The cleansing of certain animals to eat in that sheet let down from heaven ultimately pointed to the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian Church.

3. This was repeated three times: the divine command to kill and eat and presumably Peter's refusal, along with the divine words of cleansing all unclean animals. This was repeated to instill in Peter the certainty of this revelation and to put three exclamation points on this revelation.

B. What is amazing is that Peter “doubted” as to the meaning of this vision. Now he may not have understood yet the ultimate reference to the cleansing of the unclean Gentiles, but how could he doubt as to the cleansing of unclean animals? And yet God does not send lightning to strike him. God patiently corrects and instructs Peter, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou unclean” (Acts 10:15). Dear ones, there would be nothing but doubts in our minds about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the doctrine and worship revealed in Scripture apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit persuading us of its certainty and truth.

C. Now God brings the servants and soldier of Cornelius to the door at the precise time that the vision ended, and the Holy Spirit tells Peter that three men now seek him and that he is divinely appointed to go with them, for He (the Holy Spirit) has sent them (Acts 10:17-20).

1. Note here that the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force (per the Jehovah Witnesses), but is a person that speaks (Acts 10:19) and is a divine person, the third person of the Holy Trinity—the same in substance and equal in power and glory with the Father and the Son (Acts 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 3:17).

2. God's plan is coming together just as He designed from all eternity. Peter was not ready to go with these men a few minutes earlier, but now he is ready—the Lord has made him ready. This is no different as to the working of God in your life or mine. There is a sovereign plan (Romans 8:28). And though you may be troubled with doubts, dear ones, cast those doubts on to the Lord Jesus, and rest in His power, His wisdom, His love, His victory (Romans 8:35-39).

Dear ones, what walls of sin does God want to tear down in your life that separate you from Him and separate you from husband, wife, parent, or child due to unrepentant sin in your life? What walls have you built by way of your sin in saying, “No, Lord!” If you have received the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith, the evidence of that faith will not be an unrepentant “No, Lord!” It will be “Not my will, but thine be done”. Peter may have foolishly said “No, Lord”, but he repented and evidenced his faith in Christ through loving obedience.

Dear ones, God has built a wall of salvation around all of you who trust alone in Jesus Christ alone as your righteousness before God, and He Himself is that wall through which no enemy can penetrate to destroy your soul (Zechariah 2:5). Just as God was a wall of fire in saving Israel from the Egyptians, so God is your firewall against those enemies that would seek to rob you of your salvation. We need not fear what man or any circumstance in life can do unto us as long as the everlasting, sovereign God is our wall of fire. Flee in faith to this indestructible wall—the Lord God Almighty—who alone is your salvation. Your safety, your peace, your rest is in the Lord—your everlasting wall of salvation.

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