

Apparently, it only takes us three weeks for us to adjust to something new in our lives if we hang a new picture on the wall, and we're only likely to notice it for about twenty one days. New objects of furniture or electrical equipment no longer appear new after three weeks. We quickly become used to people and our surroundings, and we quickly stop noticing them and this is not always a good thing.

Over a longer period of time, people become used to the barriers that separate them from their neighbours, they no longer recognise the issues and attitudes that separate them from others. We become surrounded and isolated by countless dividing walls, and we no longer have the spiritual capacity to see them. In many regards we have even come to assume that the way we experience the world is normal. We see separation all around us; separation of the people of different classes, separation of Christian from Muslim, separation of protestant from catholic, white from black and so it goes on. Some people experience degrees of separation from family members and they stop communicating with them. And sadly, all this seems normal.

Yet, God promises that if we're willing; God will help us to see the world from the perspective of heaven. God will help us to recognise that those dividing walls in our lives were not created by God. We're ones who build the walls that separate us. What's more, through God's grace, we are called to be followers of the One who eliminates the barriers and who delights in tearing down those dividing walls. Christ claims Lordship over everyone, and that includes those on my side of the fence and those on the other side. His grace is available to everybody. It's God's will that we come to a realisation of this truth and work towards unity and not division.

Chapter two of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus teaches us that Jesus came to break down these man-made barriers. Why then, do so many Christians accept and even maintain these dividing walls?

Perhaps we've become comfortable with our barriers and we like our particular identities; which stops us reaching out to those who are different. But if we are serious about following Christ, then we must address these barriers and put aside our differences or prejudices that form our barriers.

The Apostle Paul empowered by the Holy Spirit, overcame the prejudices in his life and he broke down his own walls. Paul was a Pharisee and a fierce opponent and persecutor of the early Christians. Until his conversion on the road to Damascus, he hated Christians and all they stood for. Paul's focus was on God's original salvation plan which was exclusively for the Hebrew people, and originated in God's promise to Abraham. Scripture records the dispute between James in Jerusalem and Paul who's mission was to the Gentiles.

Their dispute was over whom Jesus' message was meant for. James in Jerusalem thought it was only for Jews, while Paul considered his mission was to take Christ's Gospel to the non-Jews or Gentiles. It appears that James had missed the point of Jesus' ministry. James' walls were very much in place!

One of the most powerful stories in the NT, is about Jesus meeting the Syrophenecian woman who had a sick daughter. This woman was from a different race and was a Gentile, a non Jew, and she asked nothing for herself. The woman's daughter had a serious illness and she sought only healing for her little girl. She approached Jesus who at first rebuked her saying *Let the children first be fed* (meaning the children of Israel) *for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs* (meaning the Gentiles). But the woman would not be put off and she answered, *Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs.*

Her plea was this: *I don't want the whole loaf. You keep that for your own people. But please Lord, if you are the bread of life, can't you at least throw some bread crumbs my way? Surely there are a few crumbs for me? Jesus then healed the daughter, and so began the ministry to the Gentiles.* Jesus' ministry changed the world and Jesus won us our salvation for we are Gentiles! And it all started because a woman who was in anguish over her sick daughter, cried out to Jesus for help. *Paul demonstrates that Hebrews and Gentiles are members of the same body, and sharers in the promises of God.* If Jesus and Paul were willing to put aside their prejudices, to reach out and encounter others, then what does this say about the disturbing number of churches that are relationally frozen. Forever caught up in their own little world, believing everything is fine and their church is healthy. They're kidding themselves and they are ignoring the examples of Jesus and Paul.

So we go on; maintaining our walls within a veneer of cooperation that camouflages our families, our workplaces and our congregations. But every now and then, the veneer slips and our walls are threatened. Suddenly the world can see that there are walls that divide us and fragile relationships that fail us. We have seen this at a racial or sectarian level where unrest boils to the surface of a community. Northern Ireland appears to be at peace at the moment, thank God that the peace treaty is still in place.

But just a few weeks ago, we learned that Brexit could threaten this peace because of disagreements over border arrangements between the Northern Ireland and the Republic. Northern Ireland has an extremely fragile peace that can be shattered in a moment. The old divides are still in place, there are still walls separating Catholic and Protestant. They have an uneasy fragile peace that always threatens to shatter, and this will continue to be the case until people change their attitudes towards each other. People cannot maintain a peace that does not exist.

There can be no peace between races, governments or faith groups; until the dividing walls in human hearts are brought down. Paul, reflecting on the conflict between Jews and Gentiles in verse 14, proclaims Jesus to be the world's only source of hope for human reconciliation:

***For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between us.*** Jesus is our peace and He breaks down the barriers and dividing walls between people.

Dr Paul Brand served as a doctor to a leper colony in India. Most cultures have shut out lepers from their society. Dr Brand found himself in a courtyard full of lepers, and the air was heavy with the smell of dirt and putrefying bandages. After being treated, some patients asked Brand if he had any words of hope for them? As he looked over this gathering of *untouchables*, his eyes were drawn to their hands. Some had no fingers, some were just a few stumps. Many patients sat on their hands and kept them out of sight. *I am a hand surgeon*, Dr Brand told them. *So when I meet people, I can't help looking at their hands and I can tell what your trade has been by the position of the calluses and the condition of the nails. I can tell a lot about your character. I love hands.*

Brand went on, *I would have loved the chance to meet Jesus and study his hands.* He described what it might have been like to see the hands of Jesus as a child, and then the rough, gnarled hands of Christ the carpenter, with the broken fingernails and bruises that come from working with carpenter's tools. *Then*, Brand continued, *there were his crucified hands. It hurts me to think of a nail being driven through the centre of my hand, because you can't drive a spike through its centre without crippling it. In that act Jesus identified himself with all the deformed and crippled human beings in the world. He shared poverty with the poor and clawed hands with the crippled.*

The effect those words had on the lepers was astonishing. Could it possibly be true that Jesus identified with them, those whom no one else would touch? One by one the leprosy patients brought forth their hands and held them high for all to see, no longer ashamed of their deformity because they realised that the one who had created their hands, had once shared in their pain. And after Jesus died, He was resurrected with a body that still bore the imprints of those nails.

*Jesus Christ is uniquely able to identify with every person who has ever breathed. There is no 'leper' beyond the touch of his love. He is Lord over everyone who has ever been afflicted or misunderstood, and his grace is freely offered to every person who has ever brought pain to us.* Jesus is Lord over the person who betrayed our trust when we were young. Jesus is Lord over the person from whom we've been separated by a wall of bitterness. He's Lord over every division of opinion or experience or background that we have ever known. What is grace in the midst of dividing walls? Grace is the assurance that even while we have remained entrenched on our side of our wall, Jesus loved and trusted us, and He's dispatched us to be wall-removers in every part of the world.

At a gathering of 42,000 pastors and ministers in Atlanta, Max Lucado stood at the speaker's podium and made a request. *On the count of three, would you please shout out the name of your church: One, two, three!* People shouted out what church they belonged to, resulting in a loud indistinguishable noise, just a racket. Lucado made a second request. *On the count of three, please shout the name to whom you've trusted your heart, soul and your entire spiritual future? One, two, three....'* And there rose in unison, the sound of just two syllables that filled the entire dome: ***Jesus!***

*(do this in church)*

In the moment that followed there was absolute silence; as the leaders of God's people were suddenly struck dumb by the realisation that perhaps they have more in common than first assumed. Perhaps the walls can fall down after all.

For in the name of Jesus, who shares his grace with those on both sides of our strongest barriers, we have more in common right now, than we have often allowed ourselves to dream. In Christ alone, by his immeasurable grace, there is power to turn dividing walls into dust.

So if we see our identity as Church of Scotland or Presbyterian, please know we are so much more than that; we are members of Christ's worldwide church. I pray that we all work to break down barriers we encounter in our church and community, and that we commit to work for unity in Christ for our church and community. And may God go with us; ***Amen.***

*(1880 words)*