

DEMOLISHING THE DIVIDING WALL ACTS 10:23-48

As a youth I had minimal exposure to political discourse, the news media, or international diplomacy, yet somehow my political convictions were very strong and very black and white. I knew, for example, that every four years there was only one good candidate running for president of the United States—the one my parents voted for. I knew that democracy was the only good and right system of governance, and that communism was pure evil. I knew that there were certain countries in the world that valued freedom, and that all those countries were good (though, of course, the United States was the best), and that there were certain countries in the world that were suppressed, and that all those countries were bad (and especially The Soviet Union). I knew that there was a bigger war than the war in Vietnam—the Cold War—and that this was the war we should really be concerned about. I knew something about “The Iron Curtain” and how it divided the continent of Europe, and that everything west of the curtain was right and good and everything east was wrong and bad.

And so, you can imagine how I felt when President Ronald Reagan went to Germany to make a very carefully choreographed public appearance at a very carefully chosen time and place to make what was perhaps the most important speech in the last half of the 20th century. He knew how important this speech was, and he wanted the eyes of the world on him at that moment. Surrounded by eminent dignitaries of freedom and democracy, President Reagan stood in front of the Berlin Wall, the preeminent symbol of the Cold War, and called out the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Firmly and resolutely, he declared, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

And that, it seemed to me, was the turning point in this awful, interminable Cold War. After that declaration the world seemed different—softer, somehow, more sunny, more sustainable, more peaceful, more promising. Those formerly fearsome men who were always angry and never smiled did not seem nearly as menacing as they did before.

While some walls serve a useful purpose, when it comes to relationships walls are debilitating and destructive. They cut off communication and destroy goodwill. They breed ignorance, suspicion, and enmity. Worst of all, they keep people estranged and alienated from each other. But when walls are broken down, not just literally but figuratively, all of those negative things can vanish and be replaced with the joy and peace and hope that come from friendship.

This morning we are going to continue looking at a story in which the biggest, widest, and most divisive wall in human history was torn down once and for all, and what it meant and still means for the human race. It's the story about God demolishing the wall between Jews and Gentiles, welcoming non-Jews into His kingdom and abruptly changing their status, their identity, their privileges, and their destiny. It's the story about God inviting those who had previously been outsiders to become insiders, those who had previously been enemies to become friends, those who had previously been spiritually impoverished to inherit and experience the glorious riches of His grace. It's a story about God flinging the door of His kingdom wide open and inviting everyone in, all expenses paid.

Let me explain, according to His good pleasure, God chose Abraham to be the father of His people. He said to Abraham, “I'm going to give you a big family—I'm going to make you into a great nation and your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the beach. And I'm going to be their God and they will be my chosen people”.

But He narrowed His choice when He chose Isaac's offspring over Ishmael's, and

Jacob's over Esau's. Jacob's offspring, the nation of Israel, became the heirs of God's promises and the recipients of God's blessings. Which meant that even though non-Jews could observe God's power and glory so that they might be compelled to believe in Him and even worship Him, their participation in His blessing was limited. Their relationship with Him was distant and superficial. They were outsiders.

But God made it clear through His prophets that one day the Gentiles would become partakers of His blessings and the heirs of His salvation. And when an angel announced the birth of the Messiah he declared, "*Behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord*" (Lk. 2:10).

God planned all along to include the Gentiles in the story of His salvation. But the precise time in which He chose to include them is this event in Acts 10.

One of the principal characters in Acts 10 is a Gentile named Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army. Somehow Cornelius had been exposed to the God of Israel and had become convinced that he was the one, true God. He was a God-fearer—someone who attended synagogue, obeyed Jewish laws, and honored Jewish customs but had not been incorporated into the Jewish community through circumcision. In other words, Cornelius was a noble and spiritually minded Gentile who worshiped the one, true God, but he was still an outsider.

Early in chapter 10 we read that Cornelius received a vision from an angel of God telling him that God had been paying attention to him and telling him to send men to the town of Joppa to bring back Simon Peter who was visiting a friend. So, he did.

Meanwhile, Peter, the other main character in this story, was receiving his own revelation from the Lord. The Lord gave him a vision of a large sheet descending from heaven that contained all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean, accompanied with a command, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat".

Peter responded by saying "No way! I've never eaten anything that is common or unclean." To which God replied, "Don't call anything common that I have made clean." I'm the One who made the rules in the first place when I gave you all those dietary laws in Leviticus 11. But the one who makes the rules can also change the rules, and, as of right now, I have just declared all animals clean and, therefore, edible. So, you must stop thinking of those formerly forbidden animals as inferior or second-rate. From now on they are every bit as acceptable to Me.

But there is more to the meaning of Peter's vision than this. For Jews, it wasn't just certain animals that were unclean. There were lots of things they considered unclean, including people who were non-Jews. And Peter, through his own theological reflection about the vision and its timing, concluded that God was changing the rules about *people*. Not only was he to stop considering any animals as unclean; he was to stop considering any *people group* as unclean. God wasn't just changing the dietary rules; He was changing the rules about who would be acceptable and pleasing to Him, who would be able to relate to Him, who would be the objects of His favor.

We pick up the story in **verses 23-33**. *The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another*

nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

Peter was doing something he had never done before, something that was totally outside his comfort zone, something that required a complete alteration of his theology and worldview. I seriously doubt whether Peter had ever had a meal with a Gentile. I’m pretty sure he had never traveled with a Gentile, and I’m positive he had never stayed in a Gentile’s home. It wasn’t because he was consciously racist; it was that he had been taught and conditioned to believe that Jews don’t hang out with people that are “unclean,” because they make them “unclean.” And prior to this, all Gentiles were considered “unclean.”

But notice how Peter realized that he should no longer call or consider any *person* common or unclean. In that vision of the sheet full of animals descending from heaven and the command to “Rise, Peter, kill and eat,” and then Peter’s vehement protest followed by God’s words, “What God has made clean do not call common,” Peter formed a theological conclusion. This is not just talking about edible animals. This is about people. And that theological conclusion is the fulfillment of the prophesy Jesus made about Peter after he made his great confession that Jesus was the Christ, Son of the living God. Jesus said to him, *“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matt. 16:16-19). Peter knew that this was the time to take out the keys of the kingdom and open the door.

First, he asks Cornelius why he sent for him. **Verses 30-33.** *³⁰ And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”*

I love Cornelius’ obedience and faith. Even though the angel had not told him anything about what Peter would do once he got to his home, he knew it had to be something big, something really significant. That is why he invited his close friends and family members to witness whatever it was that was going to happen when Peter arrived.

Verses 34-43. *³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. ³⁶ As for the word that He sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. ⁴² And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.”*

Incidentally, this message is almost identical in its content to the message Peter delivered to the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. It’s all about Jesus—His life,

His death on the cross, His resurrection, His exaltation, His victory, His power, His authority. Then Peter extends the same invitation to believe in Him and receive His provision for the forgiveness of sins.

And when Peter preaches this simple message—the Gospel—God’s power is once again activated for the salvation of those who believed. Look at **verses 44-48**. *⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.*

Notice, there is the same demonstration of God’s power and the same confirmation of God’s blessing as there was on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The Holy Spirit “fell” on these Gentiles, indwelling them, taking possession of their faculties so that they were compelled to declare the praises of God in other languages—languages they had not previously learned.

This event proves that God shows no partiality but that He loves all people. It proves that Jesus died not only for the sins of the Jews, but the sins of the whole world! It proves that the wall that existed between Jews and Gentiles has been torn down, and that the door to the kingdom has been flung wide open to all who believe in Jesus!

I began this morning talking about President Ronald Reagan’s carefully timed and choreographed declaration, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” I suggested to you that this was a turning point in the Cold War. But as important as that event was, it was not nearly as important or consequential as the wall that got torn down in Acts 10. And yet consider the circumstances: this was not a publicity stunt. There were no journalists or politicians or crowds of people there to give credence to this event. None of the other eleven apostles were present. The revelation of this monumental change in God’s dealings with mankind was given privately through a vision to a single person on the roof of a home that was on the outskirts of a coastal village. And the initial benefactors of this seismic shift in God’s plan were a family that no one in that region had ever heard of.

But make no mistake: it is because of what happened in Acts 10, that today, more than a billion people worldwide have gathered together to praise the name of the One who demolished that impenetrable wall and opened the way for us to be His friends. It is the result of what God did in Acts 10 that you and I are here today with the assurance that our sins are forgiven, that we are children of God and citizens of heaven. Hallelujah! Praise the wonderful name of Jesus!

Demolishing the Dividing Wall

Acts 10:23-48

Main Idea: In His sovereignty, God changed the rules about who would inherit the kingdom; in His mercy, God included formerly unclean outsiders as inheritors.

Peter's Obedience (23-24a)

Cornelius' Eagerness (24b-27)

Peter Justifies His Actions (28-29)

Cornelius Recounts What Happened (30-33)

Peter Explains the Gospel (34-43)

The Holy Spirit Has Imparted to Gentiles (44-46)

Full-Fledged Members of Christ's Body (47-48)

Application Questions

Acts 10:23-48

God revealed His vision to Peter in a context where he could not consult with other disciples and apostles regarding its interpretation. The circumstances dictated that he needed to act alone and immediately upon the information he received and his interpretation of the vision. What does this reveal about his leadership role in the church? Is that role still present in other leaders today? Why or why not?

By acting upon the conclusions he made regarding the meaning of the vision, Peter risked damaging his reputation and credibility as a leader in the church. What does his “obedience” tell us about the role of leadership?

God made the rules about what constituted “clean” food and people in Leviticus, and then changed them in Acts 10. What does this tell us about his nature? His plan of salvation?