

This Is Jesus: To the Ends of the Earth
No More “Us” and “Them”

April 15, 2018

**Worship Songs – The Sound That Saved Us All /
Reckless Love / T&G
Feature – Bad Blood (4)**

Video – MLK Free at Last read by students

Good morning everyone.

I think that very few would disagree with the assessment that right now ...

- Our nation is more divided than it's been in a long, long time.
- There seems to “bad blood” everywhere.
- The dividing walls of hostility – racially, ethnically, economically, politically and

generationally – are going up at a faster and faster pace.

And yet, ironically, one of the highest ideals that crosses all of those walls; one of the most inspiring visions (regardless of whatever side you are on of whatever wall there is) is a world where unity and oneness, love and acceptance, peace and harmony prevails ...

Which is why, two weeks ago, our whole nation stopped to remember not just the 50th anniversary of the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. but, more importantly, the profound way he tapped into that longing *and* the massive changes that followed as wall after wall of exclusion and discrimination began to come down – not perfectly, not completely ... but, in all of history, there have been only a few cultural moments like that of the Civil Rights Movement in this country.

My question is this: where does this vision, this longing, and this hope come from?

Why is it that we are so divided and yet, at the same time, we embrace and acknowledge – *we are moved by* – a vision in which all of the walls come down and the bad blood is healed; a vision where there is no more “us” and “them?”

That’s what I want to talk to you about today as we continue in part four of the mega-series “This Is Jesus.”

And in this particular set of messages we’re looking at what happened after Jesus was crucified ...

... specifically, what His followers did that had the effect of “turning the whole world upside down” (which is what they were accused of doing).¹

And two weeks ago (on Easter Sunday) we learned that they basically did two things that were

extremely countercultural and dangerous.

First of all, they claimed that “there is another King other than Caesar – one called Jesus”ⁱⁱ ... which was a very foolish thing to do.

Not only was it a good way to wind up on a Roman cross like the one He was nailed to, it was also a ridiculous assertion to make about a dead man ... unless of course, that man was no longer dead.

And because they believed that to be true – and not because they thought they had seen His spirit or a ghost but because of their experiences of literally *touching* Him and *eating* with Him and *hanging out* with Him for six weeks before He returned to the Father ... because they believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they did not disband like all of the other Messianic movements of that era whose leaders had also been executed by the Romans.

Instead (and this is the second thing they did) ... empowered by the Holy Spirit, they

took the upside-down way of the Kingdom of God (as Jesus had taught it to them) to “the ends of the earth.”

And everywhere they went, little communities of believers in “Jesus as King” sprang up; communities where the *grace* they had received from Jesus began to characterize their relationships with one another.

- Instead of selfishness and hoarding, there was generosity and caring.
- Instead of condemnation and judgement, there was grace and encouragement.

Last Sunday Ladell talked about the very first stages of those communities and, if you weren't here or watching online, I encourage you to check it out in the media section of our app or on our podcast.

An Unexpected Development

But a funny thing happens along the way that the first followers of Jesus aren't counting on.

And when I say "first followers of Jesus" I mean ...

- The initial core of the 12 apostles (minus Judas of course)
- Plus the 120 who were with them on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came (as Jesus had promised)
- Plus the thousands of men and their families in Jerusalem on that day who had heard the Apostles and "the 120" proclaiming the new about Jesus in foreign languages they had never learned and who then decided to believe in Him and be baptized.
- Plus the thousands who became believers shortly after that.

Basically, when I say the "first followers of Jesus"

I'm referring to the large contingent of Jewish men and women in Jerusalem who believed that even though He was crucified, Jesus had not only been raised from the dead; He was also the long-awaited Messiah of Israel whose Kingdom now existed right alongside and in spite of Caesar's – and they were a part of it.

Point being that, in the very beginning, Christianity is a decidedly Jewish movement with all the ethnic, racial, cultural, political and spiritual trappings of what it meant to be Jewish in that day and time.

But a funny thing happens along the way that these first followers of Jesus aren't counting on – and this introduces the issue I want to talk to you about today:

A whole lot of people *who are not like them* ethnically, racially, culturally, politically, and spiritually – a whole lot of “*those people*” want “in.”

- They want to follow King Jesus, too.
- They want to be part of the upside-down Kingdom, too.
- They want to be part of that gracious and generous community, too.

Now, the first followers probably *should* have expected this would happen, what with Jesus' commission to take the news of his Kingship and Kingdom to the ends of the earth.

But, when you read the New Testament book of Acts (which is the story of how they did that) it's clear that much of what happened took them by surprise ... and, in this particular case, caused them a great deal of angst – so much so that *the* key leader of the movement in the early days is actually accused of selling out to “them” and compromising *our* Jewish heritage!

... which reminds me of something that happened in my family many years ago.

As you know, Jetta and I have three daughters who are relatively close in age. When our oldest, Marilyn, was almost finished with college, she fell in love with a guy from St. Louis and things got serious – as in it became clear that they were going to get married and he would become part of our family ... which, by definition, would dramatically change things. But we weren't prepared for the amount of angst it caused Katie and Janelle.

I'll never forget the night when it got really ugly. There was lots of yelling and lots of tears because, in their minds, Marilyn was selling out. She was “breaking up the band” (so to speak). And it was painful and scary.

Now, eventually, they worked through it. And 13 years plus two nieces and one nephew later, everyone is very happy that she married Tim. But that was the “us” vs. “them” kind of thinking we're talking about though, obviously, on a much

smaller and less-important scale.

Anyway ... when the people who aren't like the first followers of Jesus ethnically, racially, culturally, politically, and spiritually want in, it's scary and threatening. And so those first followers wonder if their leader at the time, *the Apostle Peter*, has sold them out.

Acts chapter 11 says that ...

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea [the area around Jerusalem where the core of Christianity was at that time] heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men (Gentiles) and ate with them."

Acts 11:1-3 (NIV)

Now, we'll unpack all of that in just a minute, but

the thing to remember at this point is that *Peter has been an absolute rock star since the day of Pentecost ...* which, in itself, is amazing given that:

- Three times on the night of Jesus' betrayal he denied he even knew Him.
- And then he went into hiding after the crucifixion.
- And he was hesitant to even go look at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning.

But the risen Jesus had met with Peter one-on-one and forgiven him and reminded him of his calling to fish *not* for creatures in the sea but for the hearts of men and women.

And Peter had taken that seriously and gotten busy. For example:

- It was *Peter's* sermon on Pentecost that led to 3,000 men and their families getting saved and baptized.

- And it was his sermon again, just a few weeks later, when *2,000 more* men and their families believed in Jesus as King and Messiah and were baptized.
- It was Peter who had done miracles in the Temple.
- It was Peter whose shadow people wanted to fall on them in hopes of receiving a miraculous healing.
- It was Peter who had, on multiple occasions, stood before the Jewish religious leaders and refused to stop speaking of Jesus in and around Jerusalem, even after they had beaten him.

Peter was unquestionably their rock star leader ... *until* ... that day when they heard that he had gone into the house of uncircumcised men – Gentiles; non-Jewish men; men who were ethnically, racially, culturally, politically, and spiritually

unlike them.

And now, he is being called to account for his actions.

But why?

Because, in the thinking of good Jewish men and women, Jews were not to defile themselves by doing things like eating with Gentiles. From the very beginning, God had told Israel that they were to be different from other nations who worshiped idols. Instead, they were to be holy and set apart for His purposes.

And they took that seriously – so seriously that they created walls between themselves and those who were not like them.

And that's why Peter has to explain his actions.

A Divine Appointment

Now, before we look at that explanation, remember the context here is that all of these Jewish Christians (those “circumcised believers” and their families) have received a report that *Gentiles – uncircumcised* men and their families – have heard the story of Jesus and the claims about Him and they, too, have believed in Him.

By the way, that in itself wasn’t the problem. The Jewish people knew that Gentiles needed salvation. In fact, the Pharisees were quite evangelistic in their efforts to gain converts from among the “pagans.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The problem was that Peter had violated the boundary. He had crossed over the wall of separation that divided “clean” from “unclean.”

So, Luke writes in Acts chapter 11 that ...

Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story:

Apparently, they invited everyone who had a problem with Peter's actions and invited him to explain. (And by the way, his whole story is actually recorded in Acts chapter 10, but Peter is going to just summarize it for them here).

He says ...

"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision."

"I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'" Acts 11:4-7 (NIV)

Now, if you're Peter in this situation, this is blowing your mind because in the Law of Moses, it is very clear that some animals are OK for eating and some are not because they are "unclean." And

avoiding this kind of food was one way the Jews maintained their purity. They remained holy and set apart for God's purposes.

And that's how he responds:

“Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”

“The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.”
Acts 11:8-10 (NIV)

Apparently, God knew Peter wouldn't get it the first time, so He did it twice more. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Ok, so what? What does *that* mean?

Peter explains:

“Right then three men who had been

sent to me from Caesarea (a thoroughly Gentile city) stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them.”

That was the point of the vision.

“These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house.”

Acts 11:11-12 (NIV)

And this “man” is the Gentile in question. In Chapter 10 he’s actually identified as a Roman centurion in the Italian regiment by the name of Cornelius.

Now, by definition, a centurion is a commander over 100 men so not only is Cornelius “kind of a big deal,” he’s also clearly on the other side of the wall, politically speaking. He’s *a leader* in the occupying force which is holding the Jewish people hostage!

And, of course, as an *Italian*, he's on the other side of the wall ethnically, racially and culturally.

But, spiritually, something very unusual is going on with him.

Peter says that upon entering the house ...

“He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’” Acts 11:13-14 (NIV)

Turns out (as chapter 10 tells us) that Cornelius at some point has heard of the God of Israel and has come to believe in Him and worship Him.

More accurately I should say “worship as best as he could” because, remember, Gentiles were considered unclean. And being unclean, if they did for some reason come to the Temple to worship, they were segregated. There was

actually a separate Gentile section.

- It was kind of like the “whites only” water fountain ... and the “colored” water fountain.
- It was kind of like the “white section” of the bus or the town or the movie theater or the restaurant or, sad to say, *the church* ... and the “colored” section of those places.

That’s who Cornelius is to the Jewish people even though he is a God-fearing man! In fact, chapter 10 tells us that the reason the angel comes to him and says “go get Peter” is that God has heard his prayers!

And, what’s fascinating is that Cornelius is so stunned by this turn of events, that when Peter actually shows up he calls together all of his relatives and close friends and falls at Peter’s feet in reverence. But Peter makes him get up. “Stand up,” he says, “I am only a man myself.”^{iv}

Anyway, Peter continues his story to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem:

“As I began to speak ...” Acts 11:15
(NIV)

Might be interesting to know what he said. Fortunately, chapter 10 tells us. He said ...

“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” Acts 10:35 (NIV)

In other words, Peter’s mind has been changed.

There might be *animals* that are “unclean” but there is no such thing as a *human being* who is “unclean.”

And then he continues, assuming that Cornelius is somehow aware of what has happened in Judea in recent days.

“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

“You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” Acts 10:36-38
(NIV)

“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

“He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from

the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Acts 10:39-43 (NIV)

That’s what Peter said to Cornelius and his family and friends.

And an amazing thing happened while he did:

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.” Acts 11:15 (NIV)

At the beginning, what had happened? On the day of Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles preached the Gospel in the languages of Jewish pilgrims from other countries.

And upon hearing the Gospel, Cornelius and his

friends did the same exact thing. They began praising God in the language of the Jews ... which they did not know!

All of which led Peter to conclude:

“Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” Acts 11:16 (NIV)

So ...

“If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” Acts 11:17 (NIV)

“So, we baptized them all in the name of Jesus (in water) and hung out with them for a few days.”^v
Just as you have heard.

In other words ...

- If God *gives them* the Holy Spirit, who am I to segregate myself from them?
- If God *includes them* in His Kingdom, who am I to put up a wall?
- If they matter to God as much as I do (and clearly they do), then who I am to look down on them?

Answer: “I am nobody. Let God’s will be done!”

A Radical Conversion

What a fascinating story!

On the surface level, there’s the miraculous intervention of God to bring Peter – a Jewish man – to Cornelius – a Gentile – so that Cornelius could hear the message and be saved.^{vi}

But at a deeper level, as author and theologian John Stott puts it ...

“The principal subject of this chapter is not so

much the conversion of Cornelius (to Jesus) as it is the conversion of Peter.”^{vii}

I would expand that to include the whole Jerusalem church because it says in the very next verse that, when they heard Peter’s explanation, “they had no further objections and praised God” ... which is probably *the single greatest understatement* of the first century (at least in that part of the world) ...

...because what had happened in this incident would turn out to be on the order of the Civil Rights Movement in our country and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

For Christianity, this is Rosa Parks on the bus in Montgomery, AL. This turns the first-century Roman world upside-down. People have never seen anything like it. It’s *that big*.

In fact, once you realize that this is what’s going on as Christianity begins to spread, so much of

what the Apostles (Peter and Paul and James and John) write makes a whole lot more sense – Paul especially.

For example ... years after this incident, he writes to the Church in Ephesus (made up of Jews and Gentiles):

Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.

In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2:11-13 (NLT)

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us...

You know, I think I'm going to do that right now.
<move to wall>

In his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us...

*He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.
Ephesians 2:14-15 (NLT)*

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Ephesians 2:19 (NLT)

To the Galatian Church (made up of Jews and Gentiles) he writes:

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28
(NIV)

In fact, Paul at one point says that this is the great mystery in the plan of God which has been at long last revealed!

In other words, this is the hidden motherlode of Divine revelation. This has been God's intention for the human race all along.

And this is why despite all the divisiveness and polarization we experience there is still a deep longing for peace and harmony. *We were meant for this. We were created for it.*

And in Jesus and through Jesus we can have it. This is the true nature of God's Kingdom; of what it means to belong to it ...

... which brings us to the "conversion" that needed to happen to Peter and to the rest of the Jewish Christians. They needed to see and buy into "the big picture of God" which is ...

That not only is God reconciling sinners to Himself in Christ, He is also reconciling sinners to one another. For those who claim Jesus as their King, there is no more "us" and "them."

When the Holy Spirit confronted Peter's racism, he didn't just command him to quit looking down on other races. He commanded Peter to *embrace* Cornelius, to go in and eat with him.

Peter did not go from "racist" to "non-racist"; he went from "racist" to "gracist."^{viii}

See the purpose of holiness and purity was never

to shut people out who didn't live up to those standards. Instead, it was to allow God's people to fulfill the purposes for which He called them: *to be a light to the world; to be a blessing to the world.*

Conclusion

But instead of building bridges to the lost world, the Jewish people of Jesus' day (and, in fact, their ancestors) built walls.

Instead of loving and sharing with the Gentiles the blessing of knowing YHWH, they became cold and closed off from them. And not only did that break God's heart, it angered Him.

And I think it still does today when, for example

...

- Christians who are Republicans or conservatives defame, diminish and reject Christians who are Democrats or liberals

(and vice versa)

- Or Christians who are white look down on, exclude and ignore Christians who are black or Latino (and vice versa).
- Or wealthy Christians who are too good to enter into the world of poorer Christians (and vice versa).
- Or older Christians (like me) who aren't patient with younger Christians thinking they need to just be quiet and wait their turn (and vice versa).

I think what some of us need to do – all of us, maybe – is to remember again maybe in a fresh way what God is trying to accomplish by giving all of us – no matter what our race, ethnic heritage, economic status, political party and generation we may be – His Holy Spirit when we believe in Jesus.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across an amazing talk by Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil who has done a tremendous service to the contemporary church in the area of racial reconciliation. She has more degrees and books written than we have time to name.

I want you to hear her describe the impact of the Holy Spirit on the first Christians and what He wants for us.

Let's watch.

Video – Brenda Salter McNeil: Pentecost

Feature – Higher Love

1. Offering @door
2. PALs Update – \$18K
3. Baptism May 6th

Endnotes

ⁱ Acts 17:6

ⁱⁱ Acts 17:4

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 23:15

^{iv} Acts 10:26

^v Acts 10:48

^{vi} John Piper <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-god-has-cleansed-do-not-call-common>

^{vii} John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove), 186

^{viii} J.D. Grear <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/racial-diversity-in-the-church-and-our-third-race-jd-grear/>