

ME

from me to we

WE

Is life all about Me? A Me lifestyle is about the isolated individual—my ideas, my agenda, my concerns alone. From this vantage point, life is about making Me the best I can be. But faith in Jesus Christ draws us into We, where there is a relationship with God and others. We means setting our opinions aside and submitting in faith to Jesus Christ. We means being part of a family—a community of faith, united across racial and social lines. Journey with us from Me to We as we study the book of Ephesians this summer.

FROM ME TO WE • EPHESIANS 2:11-22 • Tim McConnell • June 24, 2018

Boundaries do matter. In July 1995, I enlisted in the Army Reserve. I was not an officer. If you are enlisted, that means you have to salute all officers and you are not saluted by anyone. Two years later, in July 1997, I received a direct commission as a Second Lieutenant to begin my time as a Chaplain. I became an officer—one who gets saluted. That evening, I took Abigail to Fort Myer still in my uniform. We parked on a nice hill at sunset and walked out on the grass overlooking Washington DC as the lights were going on for all the memorials and sites. It was beautiful. An MP, Military Police, pulled up and parked, got out of his vehicle and started walking toward us. I thought, "This is perfect. Abigail will see this corporal give me a salute!" But he didn't salute. He said, "Sir, do you know where you are standing? This is the General's parade grass. It is walked on twice a year, and not by you. I'm going to let it go this time, but please pay attention to signs." Then he rendered a salute. It didn't feel as good as I'd hoped! See, boundaries matter. But sometimes we make too many boundaries. Sometimes we get attached to division and lines of differentiation. We separate ourselves from others without much effort. It's as easy as falling off a wagon for us to see the whole world as "us and them." Jesus has another way. Jesus destroys division. You and I, we might need help destroying division.

In this new church in Ephesus, there were those who grew up Jewish then came to know Jesus and there were those who grew up Greek or Roman and then met Jesus. This was a huge divide. There was no bigger divide. You were either part of the covenant people of God, or you were not. That's it. The whole world was separated into Jewish and Gentile. In fact, this was Biblical. This was right, as God used a particular people to reveal His character to the world. But Jesus destroyed the division. It wasn't purposeless, this division, but with the coming of Jesus Christ, it was over. The dividing wall had to come down.

The Temple in Jerusalem had a literal wall called the "mesotoichos" to separate the true people of God from where outsiders could gather. In Acts 21, a crowd incited violence against Paul: "...shouting, 'Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere

against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.' (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple)" (Acts 21:28-29). Now read Ephesians 2:14, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." "The dividing wall" is the word mesotoichos. It's a rare word to use, and almost always means that wall in the Temple. Paul had gotten in trouble for (maybe) walking an Ephesian past the wall. Now he tells the Ephesian church, just like the veil of the Temple that separated people from God was torn in two, the wall that separated people was torn down, destroyed by Jesus on the cross.

But look at the name-calling. Verse 11: "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the body by human hands)" (Ephesians 2:11). I won't go into circumcision just now. Kids, if you don't know, ask your mom on the way to the car! Just look how the people on one team called the other people names. It's so easy for us to split into division. Us and Them. There's the story of a man found alone on a deserted island who had built a bunch of shacks to make up a kind of pretend city in his isolation, but there were two churches. He said, "Oh yeah. This one is my church—that's where I used to go to church." Let's resist false division. We might need help destroying division.

Look at what Jesus did. "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations" (Ephesians 2:14-15). Jesus completed the law in this regard. He completed the project of sharing God's character through one particular genetic lineage. He finished the Jewish-Gentile divide. And, by the way, it was not to make one people into the other people. He didn't make one become the other. If it's gold and lead, Jesus didn't turn lead into gold or gold into lead, He made an entirely new thing. "His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to rec-

oncile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Ephesians 2:15-16). A totally new humanity is created in Christ in which both parties are equals. Actual unity. Real oneness in Christ. And here's the amazing claim: God says this new humanity is His Temple on earth! "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22). A new people. A new family. A new house. As Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message: "a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home." He is quite at home with us. Jesus destroys division.

But our tendency is to fall back into division. It is easier for us to reduce things to Us and Them. It's easier to be name-callers than unifiers. It's easier to spout off on social media than actually try to understand. It's as old as Cain and Abel. Adam and Eve's boys Cain and Abel were brothers. Maybe you've heard this story (it's in Genesis 4), they both brought sacrifices to God. Abel kept animals and brought the very best, the firstborn, from his flock as a sacrifice. Cain was a farmer and brought (probably) some leftovers from his crops. God liked Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Likely, too, it was that an atoning offering, an offering to cover over the toxic poison of sin, had to be a blood offering. I'm sorry to run over this story so fast for any of you who are not familiar with it, but it turned out that when Cain got angry, overcome with envy, he took his brother Abel out into the field and killed him. Here's what I want to point out. It wasn't all about grain versus flesh. Let's say an atoning sacrifice requires blood, fine. In that case, Cain was supposed to work with Abel. He could have traded his produce for Abel's sheep and had a blood sacrifice to give. God set it up from the beginning that we were supposed to work together. We were supposed to rely and depend on one another. We were supposed to soften our edges with one another, find compromise, be a partnership of humanity before God. But Cain didn't want to do that. He wanted his own thing. So Cain killed his brother Abel, and Abel's blood cried out from the ground. But

Hebrews 12 says, "You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:23-24). The blood of Abel spilled by his brother Cain, the blood of hatred and division, does not get the last word. The blood of Jesus speaks louder. Jesus destroys division. Sadly, we are the children of Cain.

I think of families that have adopted children from other cultures. The parents have to make it clear with authority, "there is no difference kids, no division, no separation—this is one family. One household." Even as they keep alive the beauty of the culture of origin of the adopted child, the statement of unity is loud and clear. We may have been American and Korean, American and Ethiopian, American and Chinese—but this family is all of us. It's WE. Not just the "me" of each genetic background. The middle wall is torn down by love. But it takes a push, and we might need help.

It is amazing that we are reading this very passage, planned almost a year ago, the very week our nation is embroiled in border issues. The national dialogue becomes our work dialogue, our family dialogue, our social media dialogue and what is a Christian supposed to say about children at border crossings? Where do we stand as believers; as those who worship a God who sent His Son Jesus to destroy division through a sacrificial death on a cross? There is no easy solution. We stand for law and order. God grants governments sovereignty for our common good. Boundaries and borders matter. But on the other hand, along with many who perhaps are attempting to manipulate the system or do harm—along with them are families fleeing horrible violence in need of true compassion. We declare with confidence all people matter to God equally. We are one blood. Our creation doctrine teaches us we came from one blood; our salvation doctrine teaches us that Christ died to unite us in one blood. Whatever else, we as Christians confidently declare to any other person in the whole planet: "We are one blood!" And all our ethics are driven by love—love God and love neighbor. Love risks self-sacrifice; it wants the well-being of another even at loss to self. Christian love says no matter what you have or haven't done, or where you come from, your children are just as valuable and worthy of dignity as my own. We stand for the sanctity of family and the dignity of every per-

son. So, it's not that easy is it? We might need help.

As political lines are drawn and adversaries set up their turrets, and dig their trenches, and set their traps and launch the name-calling campaigns, here's what I want to say to you this morning. Don't take the bait. Don't take the bait of Cain! Don't jump into the fray villainizing opponents and shouting across lines. That's the curse of Cain. That's the blood of Abel. The blood of Jesus speaks a better word! It attests to the love of God found in Jesus Christ. It declares the power of the blood of Jesus over all. It proclaims the blood of Jesus over the blood of Cain and Abel. It declares, even in disagreement and controversy and drama and pain—it declares that in Christ division is destroyed. I don't have all the answers. It's tough. We might need help destroying division. We find help looking to Jesus.

I want to close looking back at verses 12-13: "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). We find help in Jesus when we remember. We were once lost. I was once lost. Excluded. Divided and cut off. Without rights. Without citizenship. Without any purchase in the covenants of promise. That was me. Maybe you. Separated from Christ, excluded from God's family, "without hope and without God in the world." "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). There is a place where two lines come together and intersect, sinners and saints, Gentiles and Jews, women and men, every race and nation, there is an intersection of grace where they all come together: the Cross of Calvary. On that cross hung a man who was also God; the Holy One who died for sin. One who carried the blood of all of us and poured it out in one sacrificial offering. In Jesus, we are no longer divided but one—and united with God. Jesus destroyed division. In Him, in Christ, we are not just mashed together and told to tolerate each other, we are not told to abandon our distinctiveness and diversity, we are told that there is another plane, another way of life entirely, in which you and I in all our distinctive individuality are made one—one with each other, one with God. Carried home, past the wall, into the family of God.

STUDY GUIDE

FROM ME TO WE • EPHESIANS 2:11-22

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read the passage for the week: Ephesians 2:11-22. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- Did you notice how many references to a physical body there are in these verses? What are they? Why do you think Paul keeps this passage rooted in images of a physical body?
- What does Paul tell the Ephesians about their former situation in verses 11 and 12? Why do you think Paul brings this up?
- In verse 14 Paul writes that Christ has broken the wall that had divided the Jews and the Gentiles. What were the elements of that wall? What kept them separate?
- How has Christ broken the wall?
- Re-read verses 15 and 16. Is it possible for one group to be reconciled to God without the other? Why or why not? Why wouldn't it be enough for God to reconcile only the Jews back to Himself?
- Consider the walls we build up and the divisions we create. We are pretty good at creating divisions and making it "us vs. them." What do you have to let go of to allow the walls of hostility to fall?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Are there groups in our community who feel walled out by the church? How could you reach out into one of these groups?

IN: Connect With the Family of God

Does it make your life different when you think of yourself as part of a worshiping body that is a dwelling place for God? What difference does it make?

Spend some time praying for our church family. Try to pray for people specifically by name, too.