

The Prison Letters...

Ephesians 2:11-22 LIFE LESSON

Today we're finishing chapter two of Ephesians, where Paul provides some clarity on the historical divisions that existed between the Israelites and every other nation around them. In the Old Testament, God asked a childless couple named Abraham and Sarah, to move to a new land where He promised to bless them with a son and many descendants. Those descendants went on to become the Hebrews, the Israelites, or the Jews, and through them God made a plan to bless all the other people groups of the earth (otherwise known as the Gentiles). However, the Jews never really got behind this idea, and Paul alludes to this...

📖 **Ephesians 2:11 (NLT)** *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.*

➔ **Have you ever been the victim of prejudice? If so, please explain how...**

Most people understand what circumcision is, but many don't realize how important it was to the Jews, and how they viewed other nations (or Gentiles) because they weren't circumcised. In fact, look at what Peter admitted to a group of Gentiles about this...

📖 **Acts 10:28 (NLT)** *Peter told them, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean."*

➔ **Have you ever been guilty of prejudice? If so, please explain how...**

Believing the Gentiles were impure and unclean because they were "uncircumcised heathens", and that the Jews were righteous because of circumcision, was bad thinking. In fact, like Paul implied, Jewish pride in circumcision was ridiculous because it never impacted their heart. And when it comes to being a true Israelite or Jew, it has always been about circumcision of the heart. For instance, look what Paul wrote to the churches in Rome...

➔ **Romans 2:28-29 (NLT)** *For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.*

➔ **Based on this passage, how can we tell if a person is a true Jew?**

This teaching that circumcision of the heart is a requirement to be a true Israelite or Jew, was stated not only by Moses to the people of Israel, but Jeremiah the prophet stated it as well. Here's what both of them said...

📖 **Deuteronomy 10:16 (ESV)** *Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*

📖 **Jeremiah 4:4 (ESV)** *"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds."*

➔ **When it comes to "circumcising your own heart" so that you're no longer stubborn, what would be an example in your own life where this happened?**

When it comes to true circumcision of the heart, there's what we do, and then there's what God does. For instance, the cutting away of our sinful nature is an act of God through Christ, but it's always an elective surgery, or one that's based on our choice. Or in other words, until we come to a place of surrender to Christ, or to a place where we recognize who He is, what He's done for us, and what it is that He's asking of us, and then say "yes" to Him, God won't perform this surgery on us. But when we do choose to surrender, as demonstrated by our baptism, God not only cuts away our sinful nature, He places His Spirit inside of us to change our souls. For example, look at what Paul wrote to the Jews and Gentiles about this in the church at Colossi...

📖 **Colossians 2:11-16 (NLT)** *When you came to Christ, you were "circumcised," but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross. So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.*

➔ **Based on what was stated in this passage, what ceremony matters to God, and what ceremonies no longer matter?**

So again, Paul was trying to help the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus, or Colossi, or anywhere for that matter, to realize the traditional Jewish practices of circumcision, or Holy celebrations, or even the sabbath, were all changed and no longer had the meaning they once had. In fact, look at what Paul wrote next...

📖 **Ephesians 2:12-18 (NLT)** *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. 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. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

➔ **Jesus ended the old system of law and it's commandments and regulations, then replaced it with a simple command to love others they way we want to be loved. In your own words, describe how you would like to be loved by others?**

Prejudging others is one of the biggest contributors to violence or hostility, and unfortunately, it's a practice that's permeated every religious group that's ever existed. And the only way to stop prejudice is to examine our own hearts. For example, after much reflection, Peter admitted the Jews were guilty of harboring prejudice towards the Gentiles and treated them with contempt. Which means, the Jews made no attempt to love to their Gentile neighbors. But after God showed Peter how wrong the Jews were for thinking this way, or for making laws or regulations that made it impossible to show their Gentile neighbors love, Peter abandoned those rules, and so did Paul. So as modern day followers, we need to consider our own prejudice as well, or how our predetermined ideas about a person or a people group, might be preventing us from showing them the kind of love God wants us to show them, or receiving the kind of love we're hoping for.

MEMORY PASSAGE FOR THE WEEK

"I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right."

Acts 10:34-35 (NLT)

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

LESSON GOAL: Kids will learn about how the early Jews didn't follow God's plan for them to bless all of the other people groups (or Gentiles) and instead thought of themselves as better than everyone else

MEMORY VERSE:

'So you are no longer outsiders and strangers. You are citizens together with God's people. You are also members of God's family.' | **ACTS 2:19 NIRV**

WHAT MADE THE JEWS THINK THEY WERE BETTER?

The Israelites, or Jews, had been God's people since the beginning and knew they had a special place in God's heart. But they selfishly wanted to be the ONLY ones God loved, and that wasn't what God wanted. He wanted the Jews to love and bless everyone else in the world and to teach everyone about HIM! They were keeping God to themselves.

Their knowledge and continuous study and obedience of God's laws or rules was one of the reasons they felt superior. They were pretty good at following God's rules (and even some of their own) and used that to label people who didn't know the rules or hadn't been born as a Jew as "heathens." They called them names like "unclean". They were prejudiced toward others. They were known as Gentiles and when we hear that word, we can know that it means anyone who wasn't Jewish.

PAUL TEACHES THE TRUTH

As we've learned before, Paul was a Jew and one of the meanest and most hateful toward people who followed Jesus. Especially people who were born Jewish because he saw their choice to follow Jesus as a violation of Jewish laws. But then he learned the truth and once he knew, he couldn't stop sharing it with everyone - both Jews and Gentiles.

'He said to them, "You know that it is against our law for a Jew to enter a Gentile home. A Jew shouldn't have any close contact with a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not say anyone is not pure and 'clean.'" | **ACTS 10:28 NIRV**

PAUL'S TEACHING ABOUT CIRCUMCISION

One of the laws that the Jews felt made them better than Gentiles was having baby boys circumcised at 8 days old. It was a medical procedure done by a priest in a Jewish temple to all Jewish boys. And if a non-Jew wanted to become Jewish, they were expected to also undergo the procedure, no matter their age.

After his encounter with Jesus, Paul understood that this physical procedure was not what made us right with God.

'A person is not a Jew if they are a Jew only on the outside. And circumcision is more than just something done to the outside of a man's body. No, a person is a Jew only if they are a Jew on the inside. And true circumcision means that the heart has been circumcised by the Holy Spirit. The person whose heart has been circumcised does more than obey the written law. The praise that matters for that kind of person does not come from other people. It comes from God.' | **ROMANS 2:28-29 NIRV**

Paul wraps this up in even more detail in the end of Ephesians Chapter 2 and while he's writing specifically to Gentiles, his message was for Jews, too. Jesus removed any barriers between Jews and Gentiles and we are all now equal. We can remember this when we're tempted to feel like we are somehow better than someone else or that we deserve something more than them. God loves us all the same.

'You who are not Jews by birth, here is what I want you to remember. You are called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "circumcised." But they have only been circumcised in their bodies by human hands. Before you believed in Christ, you were separated from him. You were not considered to be citizens of Israel. You were not included in what the covenants promised. You were without hope and without God in the world. At one time you were far away from God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. He spilled his blood for you. This has brought you near to God. Christ himself is our peace. He has made Jews and Gentiles into one group of people. He has destroyed the hatred that was like a wall between us.' | **EPHESIANS 2:11-14 NIRV**

DISCUSSION | REVIEW

- Have you ever felt left out? Or like people treated you differently than others? Or maybe you saw someone else being picked on or treated badly?
 - What did that feel like?
 - Do you think that's what God wants?
- Sometimes we don't realize we're the ones leaving others out. What can you do to make sure that you don't cause others to feel that way?
- What is one thing you learned today that you can share with a friend?