

Pagan and Puritan

A sermon on Ephesians 2:11-12

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Ephesians, verses 11 and 12: "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the un-circumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands - remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

Remember that and don't ever forget it, you Christians who live like pagans in protest against those who live like puritans, you who spite the Church's Pharisees by flaunting yourselves as publicans, you who flex your "Christian liberty" to taunt the scrupulous and the conscience-bound, you who alienate the separatists and give them fresh cause for their separatism. Is that the secret of your peace: to be hostile toward them? No, that is a sure way to forfeit your peace and to incur hostility all over again, and not only their hostility but God's as well. Will you vanquish the Law by despising the legalist? Hardly, for that only strengthens the Law's case against you. Is it because you are uncircumcised that circumcision was repealed? That akes better blood than yours, and don't make the Law prove it. Will you bring the work-righteous Christians to repentance by living like a clod yourself - and dying like one, and under one? Are you determined to have nothing in common with them by being so damnably common yourselves? That, remember, is one alternative. Do you insist on being worlds apart from them by losing yourselves in a slough of worldliness? Just remember, if you really were worlds apart from them, aliens to their commonwealth, then you would indeed belong to the world, "without hope and without God." If you did not share the same Father with these your brothers, and the same Father's Son, then remember what that would make you: "the children of wrath,"

"for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

Do you sneer at the slaves of "clean living" under the illusion that you are free to "practice every kind of uncleanness"? That is no freedom. That is the most servile bondage. Do you ridicule the ceremonialists, with their sacramentalism and their liturgical elites, on the pretext that you don't need to "address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," as though you may sleep through all this, as though you could "make the most of the times," and make the most of wine, by getting drunk on it? Does this make you wiser than they? This makes "fools" of you, and ingrates toward God. Do you smile loftily at their circumcised lives and their bleeding piety, congratulating yourselves on your superior theological knowledge? Does your inside track to God's secrets exempt you from loving them as Christ does, from forbearing them in lowliness and meekness? Are you so wise to their work-righteousness, so doctrinally advanced beyond their commandments, that you don't need to speak the truth in love to your neighbor, that you can let the sun go down on your anger, that you don't have to give to those in need, that you can abuse your wives or spurn your husbands or dishonor your parents or provoke your children or displease your employers or exploit your employees? No wonder the legalistic Christians suspect the Gospel is not for you. See that you don't confirm their suspicions. Remember, at least, what our peace is not. Surely it is not the hostility of pagan against puritan.

Verses 13 through 16: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end."

Here is our peace, here in Jesus Christ "in the flesh." "He is our peace ... by abolishing the law *in his flesh*." That is exactly where our peace has to be, "in the flesh," since that

is where our hostility is, "in the flesh." That is where we pagan Christians are the hostile pagans we are, "Gentiles *in the flesh*." That is where the puritanical Christians are the hostile puritans they are, "in the flesh." That is where they seek their purity and boast their works and celebrate their sanctity and distinguish themselves from us: in their flesh. That is where we flaunt our freedom and neglect our neighbors and generate our scorn: in our flesh. That *is* what we are, they and we together: flesh. And that is why Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, was made flesh: flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood. And isn't that where we die in our hostility: in our flesh and in our own blood? No indeed! That is where our hostility died: in His flesh and in His blood. Christ suffered our hostility exactly where it rages, and He suffered it to death, and out of existence forever.

But the hostility Christ destroyed was not merely the sort we harbor against one another. It was the anger of God. True, it was "*in the flesh*" that Christ put an end to that anger, but *what* he put an end to in the flesh, *what* he abolished, was the divine anger itself - "the law of commandments and ordinances," which is nothing less than the Law of the living God. What abundantly good news it is that it is that hostility - not just ours but God's - which Christ abolished. For it is the divine Law, really, which gives all the force to our hostilities. What enables the puritan to condemn the pagan, and the pagan to resent the puritan, is not only that they entertain perverse sentiments toward one another, but that both can justify their sentiments by appealing to the corresponding verdict of God. The very words "pagan" and "puritan," "Jew" and "Gentile," "pharisee" and "publican," "hypocrite" and "clod," "liar" and "thief" and "drunkard" and "wife-beater" and "shrew" would all lose their inherent reproach if there were no divine basis for that reproach. And as a matter of fact, there is none – not anymore, not in Jesus Christ. For those who are in Him there simply and literally *is* no more hostility. It is not merely a matter of their not feeling hostility anymore. That, indeed, they may still do. But their hostility, as they should know for their comfort, is baseless, when they are created one whole new man, whose peace Christ Jesus is, and who en-churches them as His own body.

And how will they know that this the case with them?

Verses 17 and 18: “He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

That is how they will know: when He, from his Father through His Spirit, Himself comes and preaches His peace to them – which (may it be said to the glory of the Trinitine God) He is doing this very moment.