

Atheists No More
Ephesians 2:11-22
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Presbyterian pastors are not known for wanting their parishioners to bring along their own, personal Bibles to Sunday worship. We usually leave that kind of stuff for the Baptists and their preachers who strut around holding their Bibles like this. You might think it is because we are afraid that people in the pews will read their Bibles rather than listen to the sermon, but you'd be wrong. We'd love that actually. No, the real reason is that most of us believe that in worship, the Word of God is meant to be heard with the ears, rather than read with the eyes. Indeed, this is how the original stories were handed down from generation to generation, and even if there was a written copy of Scripture, there were few who could read it. There are times however when it is appropriate and even desirable to "read along" during the reading of the Scriptures and even during the sermon. Tonight is one of those times. (Read passage and pray)

Before we tackle today's passage specifically, it might be helpful to have an overview of the whole book. This is a work directed to Gentile believers, faithful people who were perhaps facing opposition from certain Jewish Christians who were suspicious of their suitability and equality as Christians. Remember that Gentiles were anybody who wasn't Jewish, and you see that word here in chapter 2, verse 11, and again in chapter 3, verses 1 and 6. Gentiles could be anything

from Greeks to Egyptians, to remnants of the Canaanites, anybody who couldn't claim spiritual ancestry from Israel. What the author of Ephesians does is provide a summary of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ in regards to the Gentiles, and how they should live as a result. Throughout, the reader is reminded that it was, and is, God's purpose that the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, might be "made alive together with Christ," since "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing," but God's.

In the passage from Chapter 2 that I read, reference is made to the circumcised and the uncircumcised, recalling earlier debates about whether Gentile converts to the Jesus movement had to submit to Jewish laws and customs, the particular mark of membership in Israel being circumcision. The book of Ephesians is not interested in continuing that debate, and in fact, the Jewish point of view is really mentioned only in today's passage, and without much depth at all. The author's main concern is to recall how the Gentiles came to Christ, and to celebrate *that* history. Christ indeed has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, and that wall is not the law and commandments themselves, but rather the way they were used by some -- to obstruct access to Christ. Why should people who never had to follow a law before suddenly have to do so when it wasn't really even necessary? What Christ has broken down is the need to have any basis for nearness to God other than Christ himself. The nation of Israel, and its law, is no longer the basis for understanding the divine household, and for defining who are

the people of faith under God. Something new has replaced citizenship in Israel as a starting point. That something new is Christ as the cornerstone, and the apostles and prophets who are the foundation of a new spiritual reality. The rules of the game have completely changed.

In fact, it seems as though there is now a distinction made between the Gentile believers and the rest of the Gentiles, rather than between Jews and Gentiles. The believers to whom Ephesians is written have now transcended their Gentilehood. In chapter 4, the readers are extolled to “no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.” (4:17-18) Since the reconciliation between God and people without God has already been made, the author is reminding the Gentiles of their former status to celebrate what God has done and to provide a basis for exhorting them to a godly and ethical life, in opposition to the “other” gentiles who do not know Christ’s peace. They should not return to being godless, but continue to grow in faith. As proper citizens (now) in a divine household, they may enjoy the fruits of the peace of Christ (3:14-19) as well as the responsibilities (4:1ff). The Church’s cornerstone is Jesus Christ and all parts must work together so “that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” (3:10) to the end that “to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more

than all we can ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Jesus Christ to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (3:20-21)

That, in a nutshell, is what the book of Ephesians is all about, and so we may go about unpacking tonight’s passage, the purpose of which is to establish that Gentiles are an equal part of Christ’s universal Church, and have a role to play in working out God’s purposes. With that assurance, the Gentiles may turn their attention to the hard work of living godly lives. The way they are expected to do this is to grow together into a holy temple of the Lord, to be a spiritual dwelling place for God. Sounds easy enough, right?

Well, it might be, but they have a lot to learn, looking back on where they have come from. If you look back at verse 12, you’ll see where it says that before Christ came, the gentiles were “without God in the world,” or hopefully something similar in your translation. That’s a long way from being the Church. From no God to all God. What is interesting about that phrase, “without God in the world,” is that in the Greek, the term used is *atheoi*. If you’re thinking that sounds a lot like the word atheist, you’re right, because that is where we get our word. Now, to call someone an atheist might not seem like such a bad thing, except that to do so would have been quite insulting. Now, calling someone an atheist is likely to get you a hearty “You betcha,” such is the state of Christianity in the world. The word has a philosophical meaning and tradition now. For professed atheists, it is a badge of honor, it makes a statement about one’s stance towards the world.

Michele Tuinstra this week even sent me a link about a summer camp especially for children of atheists. But back then, almost everyone believed in some God, and to call someone an atheist was to say two things: first that your god is really no god at all, a heavy claim in a world which not only practiced an almost universal religiosity, but also highly valued religious pluralism, and second, that by virtue of being godless, you were essentially uncivilized, since the structure of society and civilization was based on religious foundations. The virtues of the various religions gave rise to the social order and one's acceptability within it. For the Jews to say that the Gentiles were godless was to say that their civilization was worthless, which of course they believed! This is why this section concludes by stating the social order established by Christ, including terms like "citizen" and "members of the household of God." In Christ, these former godless people have a place in a new society, a new humanity; they are atheists no more. There was a price to pay, to be sure, but there was security in knowing you had a place.

So if the Gentiles started out as godless atheists, to recall a Cold War redundancy, how have they turned out as a result of Christ's work? Why, as godmore, of course. Here is a word to write in the margin of your Bible: godmore, the opposite of godless and meaning that you are on the path toward being filled with the fullness of God (3:19) rather than being spiritually empty or spiritually shortchanged. To be godmore is to have a faith, to be growing in faith, to be part of a group building a spiritual dwelling place for God. A godless person has no

divine aspirations; a godmore person is moving toward a divine vision. A godless person is without hope; a godmore person looks to the future with joyful expectation. It's a silly word, I know, and I made it up, but I think you get my meaning.

I want to suggest to you that we live in a world full of functional, if not admitted, atheists, people who haven't the first clue that God loves them, that Christ died and was raised for them, that there is hope, spiritual friendship, and community. If we look at how Ephesians describes the godless, we can catch a glimpse of what that might look like today. Today, the godless are those without Christ, which is to say that they are alienated from the body politic of the Church, in other words, they aren't part of a worshiping, supporting, and challenging spiritual community; they are estranged from covenants and promises, like salvation by grace through faith, and so they don't know the abundant life offered by Jesus Christ; they have no hope and thus no sense of a purposeful future; and they are "far off" from God and the church, and other human beings, meaning that they do not have the kind of deep relationships God gives us in one another. But lest we categorize and pity them as unenlightened "others," I would suggest that there may be people in this very room who don't know God loves them, that Christ died and was raised for them, that there is hope, spiritual friendship, and community, or at least who do not know or experience that in the fullest measure. Don't worry, I am not thinking of you specifically, but I do know that in any

given church there are varying degrees of the knowledge of the mystery of Jesus Christ, and none of us really ever get it completely; we are all at least part-time atheists. As the church, we must address this atheism, this being without God in the world on both these fronts, within and outside our walls, just as the author of Ephesians was trying to do.

This is why it is important to study Ephesians, so that we might have some insight into what being without God is like for people who have never darkened the door of a church, but also so we might do a reality check for ourselves, and see where we can be seeking to be godmore, instead of godless. And beyond that, we must question ourselves as to the degree of godmoreness we exhibit, and how we are doing our part in the great building program of the spiritual dwelling place of God. How are we showing the world the peace of Christ which is so eloquently expressed in today's passage? How well are we demonstrating citizenship in a household or kingdom of God? These are the fundamental questions each Christian must face from time to time.

Now, there may be few of us here willing to admit we are godless atheists, but the proof is in the ethical pudding. If you say you are not godless, it must mean you are godmore. And if you say you are godmore, here is what you can expect: you can expect to be embraced as an equal in the household of God. You can expect to be joined together with fellow believers of all stripes. You can expect to have access to God through the Spirit. But you can also expect to be

called upon to contribute to the great building program. You can also expect to be held to account for the way you do or don't "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you were called" to use words from the fourth chapter of Ephesians. You can expect to be exhorted to live a new life in Christ, to renounce pagan ways, and to demonstrate the unity of Christ. All of these things are expectations of those who would call themselves godmore, and all of them are part of this great book of Ephesians. I would like to challenge each of you to read through the entire book of Ephesians this week. It is not a long book; in fact, you could read the whole thing every day for a week. And in your reading, be on the look out for those areas of your spiritual and ethical life where you might be a little more godless, and listen for how God is calling you to come closer to where Ephesians calls us to be. And be on the lookout too for those areas of life where you are a little more godmore, and listen for how God is calling you to share that godmoreness with the world. And through it all, may each of us experience a growing sense of godmoreness as we grow into a holy temple in the Lord. Amen.