

Foreigners and Strangers in our Midst
How to See and Relate to Those from Other Cultures
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This morning we come to the third topic in our *Truth in Love Today* series. In this series, which is interwoven with our Ephesians series, we are tackling some of the current cultural issues that are most concerning and wearisome for us as Christians today.

Our topic this morning is *Foreigners and Strangers: How to See and Relate to Those Who Are from Other Cultures*.

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There isn't a day that goes by when we don't encounter news that is related to immigration and border crossings and deportations and foreigners seeking asylum and international students being denied admission. How are we to make sense of all of that? How do we navigate our way through that? What is our role as Christians in the middle of all of that?

This morning we'll be looking at what the scriptures have to say about foreigners, and then on Wednesday night at 7 here in the sanctuary, Ethan Hall and an international team of leaders from World Welcome will lead us through a Crossing Cultures equipping evening that I think you'll really appreciate.

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Astronauts who have been blessed to leave the earth's atmosphere and then look back at our planet often experience what has been called "the overview effect."

Seeing the earth from space as one whole fragile world, with no visible political lines or borders and no obvious difference in national territory gives them a sense of connection with all of humanity, and a sense that all of our human conflicts are just petty and unnecessary squabbles.

For example, Ed Dwight, who flew on Blue Origin in 2024, reflected after his flight: "I [looked down on] the Earth. Everything looked ordered and neat and wonderful and beautiful. There was no separation between countries or states. And you ask yourself: As wonderful as it all is, why can't the people who live on it get along?"

But down here on earth, what a different experience.



It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that whenever groups of people encounter each other, you inevitably end up with three things: a border, an insider group, and a group of outsiders.

As I've shared in the past, David Myers, in his book *How Do We Know Ourselves?* highlights two consistent findings about human nature that have been confirmed across years of doing psychology experiments, both of which lead directly to this border dynamic:

1. Our attention as human beings is drawn to our differences, even when we share much in common.
2. We naturally divide our worlds into "us" and "them", an in-group and out-group.

That leaves us with a world of borders everywhere we look, on one side of which are privileged insiders who feel they belong, who feel entitled to what they have, and who feel threatened by those outside, and on the other side of which are excluded outsiders feeling pushed away from the resources and the opportunities and the people within.

Before you start hearing this discussion in political or even partisan terms, let me say now that the focus of this message is not on our nation or on our nation's border, though I think there are significant implications for how we as Christians think about issues such as immigration and political asylum and international scholarship.

Instead, I want to step back and consider the larger question of how we see others who are different from us from within a biblical framework. And, really, our focus isn't on how we see others so much as it is how we are called to see *ourselves*.

Because when we bring God into the picture, as you can imagine, everything changes, everything shifts.

Some of you may have read EM Forster's classic book, *A Passage to India*, one of the great modern novels of the twentieth century, in which he explores this theme of insiders and outsiders and how they relate, in this case in the context of British-occupied India.

Forster was not a Christian – not at all. He described himself as a secular humanist and a skeptic – which makes this scene near the beginning of the novel all the more interesting.

The scene is a conversation between Ron, a British official serving in India, and his mother, who has just arrived from England with her son's fiancée to visit her son and eager to see the country.

Mrs. Moore wants her son to know that his fiancée has seen a harsh side of him in his job as a government official that she doesn't find appealing:

She doesn't think you behave pleasantly to the Indians, you see.

Oh, how like a woman to worry over a side-issue.

A side-issue? A side-issue? How can it be that?

We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!

What do you mean?

What I say. We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments.

Your sentiments are those of a god.

India likes gods.

And Englishmen like posing as gods.

The country's got to put up with us, gods or no gods. Oh look here, what do you want me to do? Go against my class, against all the people I respect and admire out here? Lose such power as I have for doing good in this country – all because my behavior isn't pleasant? I'm out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched

country by force. I'm not a missionary. I'm just a servant of the Government. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do.

I'm going to argue. The English *are* out here to be pleasant. Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God is . . . love.

She hesitated, seeing how much he disliked the argument, but something made her go on: God has put us on the earth to love our neighbors, and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India.

He looked gloomy and a little anxious. He knew this religious strain in her, and that it was a symptom of bad health. She went on:

The desire to behave pleasantly satisfies God . . . Though I speak with tongues of angels and all that.

I quite see that. Well, I suppose I ought to get off to my files now, and you'll be going to bed.

I suppose so.

The narrator concludes the scene by bringing us into Ron's thoughts as his mother retires for the night:

The conversation had become unreal since Christianity had entered it. Ronnie approved of religion as long as it endorsed the National Anthem, but he objected when it attempted to influence his life. When it did, he would say in respectful yet decided tones, "I don't think it does to talk about these things; every fellow has to work out his own religion," and any fellow who heard him muttered, "Hear, hear." (53-54)

Forster is absolutely right that, if we take the Christian faith seriously, it will influence our lives, including the way we see and relate to the people God puts around us, and the way we see ourselves in relationship to them.

So let's explore what the Bible has to say about insiders and outsiders, and see what clarity we can come to about what this all has to do with us.

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The idea of insiders and outsiders is not unfamiliar in the pages of the Bible. It uses the terms to describe both political and spiritual realities. In fact, just last week we read this passage from Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2.12-13, 19-20

Remember that you [non-Jews] 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ . . . Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.

When you study all the various terms for insiders and outsiders in both the Old and the New Testament, I think you find that they fall into four main categories.

Don't just hear these in terms of nations and their borders. The same distinctions hold in a region or a city or a neighborhood. And as I said earlier, I think as you hear these descriptions, you'll recognize that they apply to physical realms, but they also apply to spiritual realms.

All right, let me introduce them, and then we'll spend the rest of the message zeroing in on the two most important of those for our discussion today:

Biblical Categories

Outside Outsiders Inside Outsiders Inside Insiders Outside Insiders

The various terms for insiders and outsider fall into these four main groups. Let me walk through them.

The first group is the ***Outside Outsiders***. This is referring to foreigners and strangers who live in other nations or other parts of the world. They are people who are unknown to us, and with whom we don't have anything to do unless they show up at our borders or we show up at theirs.

These are classic outsiders: the foreigners, the Gentiles, the people, the nations.

We know that they exist, but we don't see them or know them as individuals, and none of them are in our lives. They are more entities or ideas than people.

The second group is what I call the ***Inside Outsiders***.

These are foreigners who have come to our borders and crossed over and entered in.

There are several different terms for these men and women and children: aliens, foreigners, strangers, resident aliens, immigrants.

Several of the terms used for them emphasize their differences from those inside, whether in appearance or language or custom.

These are outsiders who retain their outside status to some extent, but they live on this side of the border. At best they are included, and at worst they are tolerated, but none of them feel they fully belong. They are still outsiders even though they are among us.

They might sit at the desk next to ours or drive the car next to ours or live in the house next to ours, but we still focus on how they are different from us, and we still largely see them as outsiders, not as one of us.

The third important group is the ***Inside Insiders***. Another term used for this group is the natives. One biblical word for them is the "homegrown" – people who have grown up in this land like the trees that have grown up in this soil. These are the locals. This is their home. This is where they belong. These are the citizens, the members, the residents, the inhabitants.

Some of you know that in Colorado there's been a forty-five-year long bumper sticker war between local residents and out of state transplants. Proud of being home born and tired of sharing their mountains with visitors from elsewhere, many Colorado-born have plates on the front of their cars that look like official Colorado license plates that say NATIVE. Ironically, the guy who started the NATIVE license plate fad was actually a transplant from Utah.

In response, some who have moved to Colorado from outside the state are sporting plates that say INVASIVE. Gives trans-plant a whole new meaning. I love that.

So this third category is the group of people with the NATIVE license plates.

Interestingly, if you were to hand out plates to the US population, less than 2 ½ percent of us would receive them. All the rest of us have come from somewhere else.

All right: Outside Outsiders, Inside Outsiders, and Inside Insiders. You'd think that would cover everyone, but there's actually one more important category. You could call them the ***Outside Insiders***.

This refers to those who have a home, a place where they already belong, but for whatever reason, they don't live there. They live here. There are four main biblical groups that fit this category of Outside Insider.

There are *exiles*, people who were forced from their homeland. Sometimes this group would also be called refugees.

Then there are *pilgrims*, those who are actively making their way home, passing through here on their way to there, on their way to the place where they belong.

There are *colonists*, citizens of another realm, who have brought their homeland with them into a foreign land, who retain their foreign identity and who live in a foreign land in a micro version of their homeland. You could think of this as the Chinatown dynamic.

And last, there are *ambassadors*, people whose home and whose allegiance is elsewhere, but who live in a foreign land intentionally in order to represent their homeland and their king.

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So what I'd like to do with the remainder of our time is to consider the two of these that are most relevant for us as followers of Christ. And I'll be focusing on categories that *we* occupy, not that others occupy. What is true about us as followers of Christ living in this world?

The first category I want to explore is the way that we as followers of Christ are ***Inside Outsiders***. Remember this is the group of people who live in the land but who stand out as being obviously different. They are the strangers, the aliens, the foreigners. That is, they are seen by others as strange, alien, and foreign.

We are called to **walk through the world like a foreigner**, as the misfits that we are.

Jesus says, I'm not from here, and neither are you. Not anymore. You're in the world but you're not of it.

John 15.19

The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it doesn't know what to do with you.

Peter wants us to remember that we don't share anything in common with the unbelieving world around us. That's the main theme of his first letter. He writes:

I Peter 1.17

Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

Jesus is doing nothing less than making us into little likenesses of himself. So of course the world doesn't know what to do with us. We are from a different culture. We live by a different set of values. We conform to a different set of priorities. We speak a different language. We follow a different set of customs. We live within a different set of moral boundaries.

We deal with money and possessions in a different way. And with time. And with gifts and abilities. And with relationships. And with conflict. And with weaknesses. That means we're going to stand out. We will be strange people in this strange world.

Exodus 2.2 says Moses calls his newborn son Gershom, which is a reminder that he is, and we are, "strangers in a strange land." We're invasives among natives; we're from somewhere else, and act like it.

I love the old King James translation of I Peter 2.9. It says:

I Peter 2.9

You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *a peculiar people*, that you should show forth the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Holy nation and peculiar people are synonyms. They mean the same thing. The word "holy," remember, means "distinctive." We should stand out. We should be different.

Peter urges us not to lose our distinctiveness. He cautions in I Peter 2.11

Dear friends, I urge you, [live] as foreigners . . .

We get in trouble the moment that, in our desire to fit in, we begin to lose our distinctiveness as a people and start to blend in, the moment we seek to live like insiders in this world and adopt this world's values and priorities and ways of being.

So in our dealings with natives in the Kingdom of this world, we will always be outsiders. But think about what this means in our dealings with other Inside Outsiders – which, it turns out, is most of us in some sense or another.

We know what it is like not to fit in. We know deeply what it means not to feel at home. We know what it is like for people to look at us strangely when we speak, and not to be understood. We know what it is like to feel alone and vulnerable and out of place. We know what it is like to be looked down on as an outsider.

So when we meet someone else whose language or background or appearance or cultural customs are different from the world around us, we know what that is like! We can relate.

So rather than pulling back when we encounter another Inside Outsider, we as Christians can move toward them in love, accepting them and welcoming them and caring for them and sharing our resources with them.

When we do that, we reflect the heart of God.

Deuteronomy 10.17-19

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

The scriptures teach us that, because of our experience as strangers in this strange world, we have more in common with the stranger than we do with the native. Or at least we should. And that point of identification with outsiders can become the basis for our moving toward those who are different from us in love.

That's why, a little bit later in Peter's first letter, he writes

I Peter 4.9

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Literally, that phrase "offer hospitality" in the Greek says, "offer love for the stranger."

The native world can be indifferent to the other worlds that lie before us when we meet someone from another culture or another background. In another classic book dealing with insiders and outsiders and borders, Joseph Conrad in his novel *The Heart of Darkness* describes the way that some go through life dealing with others who are different from them like sailors coming into a foreign port.

A casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. (5)

Not so for us as Christians, who see each new person as a whole world to be explored and known.

Romans 15.7 says,

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

David Myers has reminded us that part of fallen human nature is to pull back from others who different from us and to push them away. Scripture calls us to just the opposite. That word "accept" in this passage is made up of two Greek words that means "move toward one another and draw each other in."

Paul says, "Move toward one another and draw each other in, then, just as Christ moved toward you and drew you in order to bring praise to God."

Other translations say, "extend hospitality to one another" or "welcome one another" in just the same way that Jesus did to you.

We too are the stranger who doesn't fit in. How would we like to be received?

The next time you see someone who is a stranger, who doesn't seem to fit in – and that could be for ethnic reasons, or for reasons of disability, or socio-economic realities – how might you identify with them as a fellow inside outsider, and move toward them in the love of the Father?

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That leads us to the other main category with which I think we as Christians can identify. That is the ***Outside Insider*** group.

Looked at from the perspective of the Kingdom of this world, we Christians are outsiders. But pivoting around and seeing us from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, we're insiders! By putting our faith in Jesus and giving our allegiance to him as King, we have become part of the Kingdom of God! We are citizens!

In Luke 12.32, Jesus says to his followers,

Don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom!

The Kingdom is ours! We are citizens! The Kingdom of God is our home! We have found our ultimate place of belonging!

And of course at the heart of our faith is the belief that God doesn't just give us a place, he gives us himself. When we come home, he folds us into *his* arms.

As Psalm 90.1 says:

Lord, through all the generations
you have been our home!

But this side of Eden, though we have come home, there is a sense in which we still live outside the Kingdom. We are not yet fully home.

But . . . and it is so important for us to keep this ever in mind . . . even while we live in this strange world, we live *right on the threshold* of the Kingdom that is to come.

So just as we who are followers of Jesus are called to walk through the world like a foreigner, so we are called to **stand at the door like a native**.

As exiles, as pilgrims, as colonists, as ambassadors, we are Outside Insiders. And that gives kingdom purpose to our lives here, and to our every interaction with others.

We are *exiles* from Eden, longing for home, but assured of a place in the new heaven and the new earth for which we long, and we stand even now at its gate.

I Peter 1.1

To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia ...

We are *pilgrims*. Even though this world is not our home, we are traveling towards it, and we are assured that we have a homeland waiting for us to which we already belong.

Hebrews 11.9-10, 13-16

By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country . . . For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. . . . They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.

Though we are aliens in this world, we are *colonists* of the Kingdom of God.

Philippians 3.20

But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.

That can also be translated: we are a colony of heaven.

In their book *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon say:

The church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another. (12)

We together are an outpost of the Kingdom of God, and our homes and our churches are the front porches of the Kingdom that is being built in our midst.

And we are here on purpose, serving as *ambassadors* of the coming world where we already have our citizenship. Though this world is not our home, we were sent to it on mission, with holy purpose, from the world that awaits us – sent to this world to represent – to re-present – Jesus our King.

II Corinthians 5.20

So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!"

All of which is to say, while we wait for Jesus' return, we don't just bide our time. And we don't pull back from this unfamiliar world and retreat away from it into our Christian enclaves.

Part of our privilege and calling in this world is to *stand at the door like a native*, and to help other strangers and aliens come home with us, to help them find the front door of the Kingdom so they too can enter in.

Sam Shoemaker was a pastor who was instrumental in helping to start Alcoholics Anonymous. He wrote an incredibly thought-provoking and challenging poem that reflects his awareness that though, on the one hand, we walk in this world as foreigners, on the other hand, we are already home, and wherever we go in this world, the door right behind us stands open for others to enter in with us. Here's a part of that poem. It's called "I Stand at the Door."

I stand by the door.
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.
The door is the most important door in the world -
It is the door through which men walk when they find God.
There is no use my going way inside and staying there,
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.

And all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where the door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind men,
With outstretched, groping hands,
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it...

The most important thing that any man can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands
And put it on the latch ...

Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,
And open it, and walk in, and find Him.
So I stand by the door.

Though we walk through this world as spiritual outsiders, we live in this world as spiritual insiders to the kingdom of God.

What if we went through life thinking of ourselves – wherever we are, wherever we go, wherever God takes us; in our neighborhood, our school, our work, our travels – as standing at the open front door of the kingdom, the kingdom to which we already belong, in which we are already citizens, and of which we are ambassadors?

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All of which ushers us to the communion table this morning.

Ours is a world of borders, and insiders, and outsiders. It seems only those who leave this planet see a world without them.

But there is another way for those borders – the Great Wall, the Gaza Fence, the Wall – and those insider and outsider groups to disappear. Not by pulling so far back that we can't see them. But by staying right here in this world, as long as God has us here, and participating in the new unified humanity that God is creating right now in our midst through Christ.

While we walk through this world as foreigners and outsiders, living distinctive lives, but standing at the door as natives and insiders, welcoming others home, we are living in the expectation of God eventually fulfilling his promises and completing his purposes of bringing all things together as one under the loving rule of Jesus.

As Ephesians 1.9-10 says

God made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

And when that moment comes, all of the Inside Outsiders and all of the Outside Insiders will be gathered home and welcomed in, and God's new humanity will be constituted at last, a new humanity that wraps its arms around and includes individuals from every people group and nationality and language and ethnicity that this world has known.

John describes it in a vision in Revelation 7.9 when he writes:

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb.

Our own congregation continues to grow in reflecting the ethnic diversity of our world and of our community, which is such a joy to me, and in doing so, we together hold up to this world a picture of God's ultimate design for humanity, of one new family united as one under Jesus the King. We put the inbreaking kingdom of God on display.

The communion table is a table of commemoration, a way of looking back to the sacrifice that Jesus made to give us life and reconcile us to God.

In the light of that, when you pass the bread to the person next to you, would you please say "Jesus gave his life for *you*" and then respond with "Thanks be to God."

But the communion table is also a table of anticipation, a way of looking forward, enjoying together a foretaste of that day when all God's people will gather around the great banquet table in the presence of God and find our rest and peace and satisfaction in his presence forever.

In that light, when you pass the cup, would you please say, "Jesus gave his life for *us*," and then respond with "Thanks be to God."

If you are not a follower of Jesus, don't feel any obligation to take part in this celebration. But you might use this time to meditate on the things we've talked about, and what it could mean for you personally if they were true.

Come to the table of anticipation; come to the foretaste of the kingdom; come, new humanity, to the feast of your king.