

Ephesians: Grace Changes Everything

Part 5. Unity in Christ

As we continue our journey through the book of Ephesians, we will be focusing on a passage that highlights the unity we have in Christ. In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul addresses the division between Jews and Gentiles and how Christ has reconciled both groups into one body, creating a new humanity and establishing peace.

Ephesians 2:11-22 *"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) - 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

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. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

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."

This passage is divided into three main sections: the former state of the Gentiles (verses 11-12), the reconciliation through Christ (verses 13-18), and the new community in Christ (verses 19-22). Each section provides us with profound insights into the nature of our unity in Christ and the peace He brings.

The Former State of the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-12)

Paul begins by reminding the Gentile believers of their former state before coming to Christ. He emphasizes their separation from God and the Jewish people.

Gentiles by Birth:

"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)." Paul addresses the Gentile believers, reminding them of their past identity as Gentiles by birth. They were considered "uncircumcised" by the Jews, who took pride in their physical circumcision as a sign of their covenant with God.

The term "uncircumcised" was often used derogatorily by the Jews to describe the Gentiles. It highlighted the physical and cultural distinction between the two groups. This distinction created a significant barrier and a sense of superiority among the Jews.

Separation from Christ and Israel:

"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." Paul emphasizes the spiritual and social separation the Gentiles experienced. They were separate from Christ, excluded from the community of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise. This separation meant that the Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world. They did not have access to the promises and blessings that were part of God's covenant with Israel. Their exclusion left them in a state of spiritual alienation and hopelessness.

The Reconciliation Through Christ (Ephesians 2:13-18)

Paul then transitions to the transformative work of Christ, highlighting how He has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles through His sacrifice.

Brought Near by the Blood of Christ:

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Paul contrasts the former state of the Gentiles with their new reality in Christ. Through the blood of Christ, those who were once far away have been brought near. This nearness signifies a restored relationship with God and inclusion in His covenant community. The blood of Christ refers to His sacrificial death on the cross. It is through His atoning sacrifice that the barrier of sin is removed, and reconciliation with God is made possible. This act of grace extends to all people, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background.

Christ as Our Peace:

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." Christ is described as our peace, the one who has made peace possible by reconciling the two groups - Jews and Gentiles - into one. He has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, that separated them. The *"dividing wall of hostility"* likely refers to the ceremonial and legal distinctions that separated Jews and Gentiles. By setting aside the law with its commands and regulations, Christ has removed the barriers that caused division and enmity. His purpose was to create a new, unified humanity.

One New Humanity:

"His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." Christ's reconciling work goes beyond individual salvation; it includes the creation of a new, unified community. This new humanity is characterized by peace and reconciliation, both with God and with one another. Through the cross, Christ has put to death the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles. He has reconciled both groups to God in one body, creating a new community where unity and peace prevail. This new humanity is not defined by ethnic or cultural distinctions but by a shared identity in Christ.

Preaching Peace:

"He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." Christ's message of peace extends to both those who were far away (Gentiles) and those who were near (Jews). Through Him, both groups have access to the Father by one Spirit. This access to the Father is a profound privilege made possible by the Holy Spirit. It signifies a restored relationship with God and the breaking down of barriers that separated humanity. In Christ, all believers, regardless of their background, are brought into a unified relationship with God.

The New Community in Christ (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Paul concludes this passage by describing the new community that has been formed in Christ. He uses several metaphors to illustrate the unity and significance of this new community.

Fellow Citizens and Members of God's Household:

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." Paul emphasizes the change in the Gentiles' status. They are no longer outsiders but are now fellow citizens with God's people and members of His household. This metaphor of citizenship highlights the inclusion and belonging that comes with being part of God's kingdom. As members of God's household, believers are part of a spiritual family with God as their Father. This new identity brings with it privileges and responsibilities as part of God's people.

Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets:

"Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." Paul uses the metaphor of a building to describe the new community. The foundation of this building is the teaching of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. The cornerstone is the most important stone in a building, providing stability and alignment. Christ, as the chief cornerstone, ensures the integrity and unity of the entire structure. The apostles and prophets laid the foundational teachings upon which the church is built.

A Holy Temple in the Lord:

"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." The new community is likened to a holy temple, joined together in Christ and rising to become a dwelling place for God. This temple is not a physical structure but a spiritual one, made up of believers who are united in Christ. The imagery of a temple emphasizes the sacredness and holiness of the community. As God's dwelling place, the church is set apart for His purposes and reflects His glory. This unity and holiness are essential aspects of the new humanity created in Christ.

A Dwelling for God's Spirit:

"And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Paul concludes by affirming that believers are being built together to become a dwelling place for God's Spirit. This ongoing process of being built together emphasizes the continuous work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. As a dwelling place for God's Spirit, the church is empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. This divine presence ensures that the church remains united, holy, and effective in its mission. The presence of the Holy Spirit is a testament to the transformative power of God's grace.

Practical Applications:

Embrace Your Identity in Christ:

Reflect on the profound truth that you are no longer a foreigner or stranger but a fellow citizen and member of God's household. Embrace your new identity in Christ and let it shape your sense of belonging and purpose. Take time to meditate on the significance of being part of God's kingdom and family. Allow this truth to give you confidence and security, knowing that you are deeply loved and valued by God. Spend time in personal reflection and prayer, asking God to help you fully embrace your new identity in Christ. Reflect on the ways God has transformed your life and give thanks for His grace and love. Engage in a study of Scriptures that highlight your identity in Christ.

Passages like Ephesians 2:11-22, 1 Peter 2:9-10, and Romans 8:14-17 can help deepen your understanding of who you are in Christ. You could also write down some affirmations based on your new identity in Christ and speak them daily. Let these affirmations remind you of your worth, value, and belonging as a member of God's family.

Pursue Unity and Reconciliation:

Recognize the importance of unity and reconciliation within the body of Christ. Seek to break down any barriers or divisions that may exist within your church or community. Pursue peace and reconciliation, both with God and with others. Reflect on areas where there may be division or hostility in your relationships or community. Take intentional steps to promote understanding, forgiveness, and unity. Pray for God's grace and wisdom to navigate these challenges and to build a more unified and loving community.

Practice some healthy conflict resolution in your relationships. When conflicts arise, seek to address them with grace, humility, and a desire for reconciliation. Use biblical principles of peacemaking, such as those found in Matthew 18:15-17 and Romans 12:18. Promote diversity and inclusion within your church and community. Celebrate the variety of unique backgrounds and cultures of those around you and seek to create an environment where everyone feels valued and included.

Get involved in initiatives that promote unity. Whether it's through community outreach, social justice efforts, or interfaith dialogues, look for ways to be a catalyst for healing and reconciliation.

Live Out Your New Humanity:

Live out your new identity as part of the new humanity created in Christ. Let go of old prejudices, biases, and divisions, and embrace the unity and peace that Christ has established. Reflect the love and grace of Christ in your interactions with others. Consider how you can be a peacemaker and a bridge-builder in your community. Look for opportunities to connect with people from different backgrounds and cultures and seek to build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

Engage with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Learn about their experiences, perspectives, and traditions, and seek to build meaningful relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. Demonstrate the love and grace of Christ through acts of kindness and service. Look for opportunities to serve others and to be a blessing to those around you. Participate in community-building activities that foster unity and connection. Whether it's through church events, neighbourhood gatherings, or volunteer opportunities, seek to build a sense of community and belonging.

Build on the Foundation of Christ:

Ensure that your life and faith are built on the foundation of Christ and the teachings of the apostles and prophets. Study God's Word diligently and seek to apply its truths to your life. Let Christ be the cornerstone of your faith, providing stability and alignment. Engage in regular personal Bible study and seek to grow in your understanding of God's Word. Surround yourself with sound teaching and seek the guidance of mature believers who can help you build a strong foundation in your faith.

Make Bible study a regular part of your routine. Join a Bible study group that helps you grow in your understanding of God's Word. Seek out sound teaching and preaching that is grounded in Scripture. Listen to sermons, podcasts, and teachings that help you build a strong foundation in your faith. Find a spiritual mentor who can guide you in your faith journey. Seek the wisdom and guidance of mature believers who can help you build a strong foundation in Christ.

Understanding the Depth of Reconciliation in Christ

To fully appreciate the reconciliation that Christ brings, we need to delve deeper into its theological and practical implications.

Theological Implications:

Reconciliation in Christ is not just about mending human relationships; it is first and foremost about restoring our relationship with God. Sin created a barrier between humanity and God, but through Christ's sacrificial death, that barrier has been removed. We are now reconciled to God, and this reconciliation forms the basis for our unity with others. This reconciliation is comprehensive, affecting every aspect of our lives. It transforms our identity, our relationships, and our purpose. It brings us into a new community where peace, unity, and love prevail.

Practical Implications:

Reconciliation in Christ calls us to be peacemakers and bridge-builders. It challenges us to break down the barriers that divide us and to seek unity and harmony in our relationships. It requires us to address issues of injustice, prejudice, and discrimination, and to work towards healing and reconciliation in our communities. This reconciliation also calls us to live out the values of God's kingdom - values of love, grace, mercy, and justice. It invites us to participate in God's redemptive work in the world, bringing His message of reconciliation to those who are far off and those who are near.

Living as a Unified Body in Christ:

The unity we have in Christ is not just a theological concept; it is a lived reality that shapes how we interact with one another and how we function as the body of Christ. Unity requires intentional effort and commitment. It involves actively working to build relationships, promote understanding, and address conflicts. It calls us to prioritize the well-being of the community over our individual preferences and to seek the common good.

Unity in Christ does not mean uniformity; it means celebrating the diversity of gifts, backgrounds, and perspectives within the body of Christ. It means recognizing that our differences enrich the community and reflect the multifaceted nature of God's creation. Unity is expressed through our collective service and mission. As the body of Christ, we are called to work together to advance God's kingdom and to serve those in need. This collaborative effort requires humility, cooperation, and a shared vision.

Conclusion:

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul presents a powerful vision of unity in Christ. He reminds us of our former state of separation, the reconciliation we have through Christ, and the new community we are part of in Him. As we reflect on these truths, let us embrace our identity in Christ, pursue unity and reconciliation, live out our new humanity, build on the foundation of Christ, and be a dwelling for God's Spirit.

May we carry these truths in our hearts and live out our faith boldly and joyfully. Thank you for joining us on this journey through Ephesians. It is my prayer that we will continue to grow in our understanding of God's grace and live out the unity we have in Christ.