



Week 4: God's Different Together Family Ephesians 2:11-22

GOAL:

To recognize the joy there is to be found in God's new family as we seek unity with other believers.

CHECKLIST

- Reach out individually to anyone who did not attend last week. Let them know that you missed them and would love to see them this week.
- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Finalize the date for your Grow Group Prayer Night and send the date to Amy.
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members (please include their names and contact info in the meeting notes section). Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Father, I come before you with a grateful heart, remembering that once we were far off, separated from you, and without hope. But now, through Christ Jesus, we have been brought near to you. Thank you, Lord, for breaking down the dividing wall that once separated us from you and from others. Lord, help us to walk in this newness of life. As we study your Word, strengthen our faith and deepen our unity, and soften our hearts to those around us. In all things let us honor you as one body in Christ, where there is no division but a bond of peace that comes from your Spirit.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT, COORDINATE, & PRAY

Some of our groups may have new guests this week who were invited through our Christmas Store registration. If so, consider doing group introductions again to help them get to know others in your group.

To connect relationally and also to elicit ways to pray for one another, ask all group members to share one way they saw God at work in the past week, and one way they are praying for God to work in the week to come. Then spend time praying for your group members and for your time together today.

If you haven't already, decide on a date in October or early November for your Grow Group Prayer Night. Be sure everyone marks this date on their calendars. Email Amy with your date also. (Thanks!)

DISCUSS

- Has there ever been a time you felt like an outsider, and someone helped you? How did that make you feel?

BEFORE: Read Ephesians 2:11-12.

- In these two verses, Paul asks the reader to remember: "Remember that formerly you were Gentiles"; "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ". What is Paul so intent on them remembering, and why?

Leaders: Remember, (see what I did there) Paul is writing to a mainly Gentile audience. The Jews called Gentiles "the uncircumcision," because Jewish males were distinguished from Gentiles by being circumcised eight days after birth to show that they were Jews, members of God's chosen people. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians that it was not necessary to convert to Judaism and keep the Jewish laws in order to become a follower of Christ. So these Gentiles had become Christians. Paul told these believing Gentiles to think about what they lacked before their life with Christ and what they had gained. As Christ-followers, they no longer lived outside the circle of God's people. Now, they lived in the Kingdom of God as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, they knew what God promised through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and they knew these promises now applied to them too. Now, they had reasons for hope in this life and for the life beyond. Now, they knew God and they knew that God loved them and cared for them. But Paul wanted them to remember what life was like before Christ, before they had a chance to draw near to God.

- What do you remember about your life before Christ, or the early years with Christ?

Leaders: We are like these Gentiles. We were once separated from Christ by our sin. It is helpful to

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remember this as we continue our conversation through the rest of this passage.

It may also be helpful for you to think about your own story here. This is an opportunity for your group members to practice sharing a part of their testimony. Some people in your group may have been following Christ for a long time, so this may be a little more difficult, but we all know what it is like when we are living outside of Christ's direction and will for our life. This may be a good direction to go if there is difficulty remembering a time before our relationship with Christ started.

BUT GOD: Read Ephesians 2:13-18.

- Verse 13 says, "But now in Christ Jesus..." This verse transitions us into the next section of verses. Paul was helping the readers to remember and recognize what life was like before Christ, and now he is discussing what Christ did. What do these set of verses tell us about what Christ has done for you, for me, for our community?

Leaders: *Paul is telling the Gentiles, and us, that we no longer have to be separated from a relationship with God (far to near, v. 13). He has destroyed barriers, brought us together, allowed us to have peace with other (vs. 14-15), and has provided access to the Father (v. 18).*

To be "in Christ" is to be in such a close relationship with him spiritually that it is similar to living with someone in the same household; it is to live totally influenced by him as he surrounds us with his love, guidance, and presence. Because Jesus died on the cross for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews, through their faith in him they could now draw near to God, they are born again into a new life, and they become new people. This is what Jesus has done for us too.

Jesus Christ is also our peace, because believers in Jesus Christ are now "in Christ" (see verse 13). By his teaching and by his dying in human flesh, Jesus brought both believing Jews and believing Gentiles together. After Jesus rose from the dead, he created his Church and made it available to all who call on him. We are all invited to be a part of one family and fellowship in the Kingdom of God. Since Jesus Christ is our peace, he breaks down the walls of hostility and separation between believers.

In Christ, the Church is one new humanity, and we now focus on him and on following him daily. Believers are unified in Christ and should live in peace with one another.

- What barriers do we put up that prevent the kind of relationship Paul is encouraging here? What is challenging about tearing down these barriers?

Leaders: *Maybe another way to think about this is, "what are we most fearful of when it comes to the differences between us and others?"*

There can be all kinds of barriers we let affect our relationships. Cultural, ethnic, political, socioeconomic, etc. You know your Grow Group. You know how they are alike or how they are different. Be productive in how you approach these conversations to allow for challenging, but also healthy and

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peaceable, conversation to happen.

Sometimes we can read passages in Scripture and think that the situations we live in are so different or more difficult than when the passage was written that we have a hard time seeing how it can relate to us now. Well, Paul knew what he was talking about when he wrote this.

Remember who Paul was before he was Paul? He was Saul. Saul was a Jew, and he was proud of his heritage, as he describes in Philippians 3:5: “Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee.” Paul was zealous and devout. In fact, he was so zealous that persecuting Christians was the natural way for him to show his devotion. Does that sound very peaceable? Not at all. But Christ. Paul had an amazing encounter with Christ that changed everything. Paul was now a part of Christ’s Church, and it had broken down the barriers of hostility and separation he had for others.

Paul was also writing this letter in a pretty hostile time. There were still Jews who had contention with the teaching that Gentiles could now be a part of God’s chosen people. In fact, they were taught that Gentiles were “dogs” and unworthy of God’s love. You can imagine how this made the Gentiles feel about the Jews.

So, this is the situation in which Paul is writing. There was longstanding historical and cultural tension and separation between these two groups of people. We can relate to cultural tension, can’t we? While the difference today isn’t between Jew and Gentile, we live in a community that is very diverse in age, ethnically, politically, etc. And if we aren’t careful we can let these differences cause great tension and divisiveness...even in the church. This was a challenging time for Paul and it is a challenging time for us. But Paul is clear in his message, which rings true today as much as it did when he wrote it. In Christ, unity is not only possible, but also expected.

AFTER: Read Ephesians 2:19-22.

- Now what? We have recognized the need to remember what life was like before Christ, what he has done for us, and how there may be barriers in our lives or in our community that hinder us from living in unity with others. Verse 20 calls Christ our chief cornerstone. What is significant about this?

Leaders: *Paul ends the chapter with an analogy, speaking of believers in the church like the stones in a building and placing Christ as the piece that holds it all together. If we are seeking to really be a part of God’s family, we need to seek unity with others in his family. Just like a house, if the foundation is faulty, the house will begin to shift, crack, and if bad enough, fall over.*

Christ makes all the difference whether we are the prototype God desires. This applies to us individually, but also VRBC as a church. The Holy Spirit and Christ are the unifying factors. He is the one who allows for us to tear down barriers that prevent unity in our own personal relationships, and in the health of our church body. We can celebrate the diversity in our church and community because, as

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John said, it is a living, breathing, picture in the present of what he has for us in the future when Jesus comes back as King.

Our proximity to Christ will inform our unity with others. When we begin seeing others as people created by God, just like we are, we can begin to treat them as such.

We could just look at this passage or idea theologically and doctrinally, but the real change comes when we look at who we are on paper and ask, how do we live it out. We have to place Christ at the very center of our lives and of our church.

- How do we break down barriers that may be preventing unity with other believers in our life?

Leaders: *This boils down to identity. Where do we put our identity? Is it in where we live, the job we have, our political views, what our family looks like, etc. Or is our identity found in Christ?*

There is a young man in our student ministry who has really struggled getting connected. This past Sunday, one of our other students approached this young man, introduced himself, and invited him to come up stairs with him for Grow Groups. He then preceded to introduce him to the other students in the room. This made a huge impact on this young man's desire to be there. He told his mom afterward he had a great time and wanted to go come back this week. These boys are different ages, live in different homes, come from different backgrounds. But in that moment, it didn't matter.

How do you think that made that young man feel to have someone recognize that they didn't know him, introduce themselves to him, and make him feel like he really belonged here? When we put our identity in Christ we begin to see others as creations of the living God. Then we can love them, care for them, and encourage them like Christ does for us.

We have such a diverse church in a lot of different ways. We have such a great opportunity to build strong, healthy, kingdom-focused relationships with the people right here in our own church and continue to show our community who our God is by the way we relate to one another.

- Think about John's challenge at the end of his message. How are you going to connect more deeply with someone in our church who is different from you?

Leaders: *Talk with your group about the challenge John gave. Ask them to share who they feel led to connect with this week. (Saying it out loud gives us some extra motivation and accountability to follow through.) Take some time to discuss creative and fun ways to get to know people that you do not regularly get to connect with. Each of us have a chance here to make an impact on connecting our church closer together as a whole. If you want, it could be encouraging to tell your group they will have some time next week to share about any experiences they had.*

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PRAY

1. Pray for ourselves. Begin this time of prayer by silently reflecting on where you may have boundaries that cause division.
2. Pray for VRBC. If your group is large, consider dividing into groups of 3-5. Spend some time as a group:
 - A. Thanking God for the diversity in our church.
 - B. Praying for our church to be a place that is first and foremost unified by Christ.