

MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

Ephesians 2:11–22

Key Verse: 2:19

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...”

Who are you? Many people grab onto certain things to give themselves an identity. Maybe it's their ethnicity, or what they're good at, or their career. Some join a group. Even with these things some admit, “I don't know who I am.” Others say, “It's complicated.” It's not just a philosophical matter of exploring our inner self. Divergent identities often cause people to become hostile to one another. We've seen this in some devastating ethnic conflicts around the world, and in our own country in its extreme polarization and racial hostilities. There's only one identity that truly brings people together. It's in Christ. As believers we're made alive by grace (5). We're God's workmanship, “created in Christ Jesus” (10). Now, even among people with extreme differences, Christ has “created in himself one new man” (15). In Christ, God has given us a brand new identity. What is it? Paul says we're all members of the household of God (19). How can I have this new identity? How can I see other believers as fellow members of God's household? Why should I? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

In Ephesians Paul mainly addresses Gentile believers (3:1,6,8). He wants them to know that in Christ they have every spiritual blessing (1:3). He prays for them to have the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (1:17). He reminds them of God's grace that brought them from being dead in sin to being alive with Christ (2:4–5). Now he gets into his main topic: how they fit into the church. Paul has just reminded them of their former condition before God as children of wrath (1–3). Now he reminds them of their former status among God's people. Look at verses 11-12. They were “alienated,” “strangers” and in mutual hostility with God's people. What drove a wall between them? These Gentiles were uncircumcised. Jews called them “the uncircumcision.” In their culture, it was a derogatory, insulting word, almost like a racial slur today. At the same time, Jews called themselves “the circumcision.” They were so proud of it, like a badge of honor. They thought circumcision made them superior to everybody. So Paul adds, “...which is made in the flesh by hands.” Basically he's saying circumcision is not important at all. “By hands” means it's not by God's hand but by human effort. It's similar to the “works” Paul mentioned earlier that make people boast (9). People can still make religious activities objects of pride that they think give them an identity. But what these things really do is cause divisions.

Look at verse 12 again. Their situation was really bleak. One word that stands out here is “alienated.” The Greek word means to be shut out of fellowship and intimacy. It’s like our word “estranged.” In our country, estrangement is rampant. Even couples or close family members stop talking to each other or seeing each other. It’s not just because they’re too busy; it’s due to some conflict that breaks off the relationship. Being “alienated” or “estranged” leaves people wounded and lonely. Here Paul mentions “the commonwealth of Israel” and “the covenants of promise.” It’s more than just a family matter; Paul is talking about the right to be among God’s people. Being among God’s people means inheriting all God’s promises of blessing together. It means being full of God’s hope and enjoying God’s own presence together. How awesome is that! This is why in Christian history it was considered so horrible to be excommunicated from the church.

In the world there are many exclusive groups. Historically, universities have been elitist, as have their fraternities and sororities. Social and economic status and race have also been so. Rich and privileged people enjoy many things among themselves, and poor and marginalized people have been left out in the cold. At the local level, human beings create their own social cliques that never let outsiders in, no matter how hard they try. These things have been going on among all human beings all over the world, down through the ages. God made us all as social creatures, to have fellowship with him and with others. This is why alienation and being treated as an outsider are so painful and leave such deep scars. But among all the exclusive groups in the world, Paul sees the church quite differently.

Read verse 13. To Paul, the church is unique in that it brings in even the people who have been “far off.” “Far off” means cut off from God and living without him in the world. It also means living far off from how God wants his people to live. How can people who’ve been so far off suddenly come near to God and his people? Paul says here it’s “by the blood of Christ.” It’s our ticket that lets us in. How can we dare be among God’s holy people? It’s only by the blood of Christ. Why is that? It’s because we’re so sinful. And it’s because only his blood can cleanse us. “By the blood of Christ” isn’t some outward activity or ritual; it means all we have to do is accept his blood by faith (Ro3:25a). No matter how far off we’ve wandered, if we turn back to God and put our trust in the blood of Jesus, God welcomes us among his people. When people deeply believe this, we need to welcome them.

Read verse 14. Jesus is our peace. Jesus alone gives us peace with God (Ro5:1). Only in his peace can we have peace with other believers. It’s interesting. In history, Christians have been so divided. They’ve created various dividing walls of hostility among themselves. They’ve fought over many issues, both in doctrine and in practice. Some

church people are actually looking for something to criticize, something to fight about, not because it's so serious but simply because they like debating and fighting. Hostility is not always outward and obvious; it can lie buried inside us, especially in passive-aggressive behavior. When a church is filled with all kinds of layers of mutual hostility, it's not a healthy place. How can we get out of such a condition? It says here, "For he himself is our peace." When we make Jesus our focus, we find a common identity, across cultures and generations. Only in Jesus can we have peace.

It also says here that he has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. What does this mean? Verse 15a says, "...by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances..." When Jesus died, he became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn1:29). Through his perfect obedience to God in his death, he fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law. Jesus is "the righteousness of God" (Ro1:17; 3:21–22). When we believe in him, we're no longer under any kind of condemnation. His righteousness becomes ours. He fills us with the Spirit, who gradually enables us to be and live like he did (Ro8:1–4). We don't need to try to keep all kinds of religious laws to become more righteous. We're already fully righteous, through faith in Jesus. This gospel is good news for everybody. But anybody who wants in among God's people has to accept the gospel personally. We get in not based on who our parents are or on our human faithfulness, but only on genuine faith in Jesus.

Paul explains another purpose of Jesus' death. Read verse 15b. "...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace..." This points back to God's workmanship in verse 10. 2 Corinthians 5:17 puts it plainly: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (cf. Gal6:15). "A new creation" includes a new identity. Each Christian is God's new creation in Christ. We still have our personality, our ethnicity and all our other distinctive elements. But they all don't matter so much anymore (Gal3:26,28). Now, our primary identity is in Christ and in his people. This is how people, so different from each other humanly, are now one in Christ. We don't insist on other things, but on our identity in Christ as his new creation. And we don't insist on other things from others, but honor their new identity in Christ and consider ourselves as one with them by faith.

Paul mentions one more thing that makes our unity possible. Read verse 16. Unity is possible when we're reconciled to God. How does it happen? Paul says it so simply: "through the cross." Our sin broke our relationship with God. Basically, in his holiness God couldn't accept us, and we in our sin were hostile to him. Only the cross of Jesus could reconcile us. God laid all our sins on Jesus. And as we look at Jesus on the cross by faith, we realize that he was punished in our places to give us peace (Isa53:5). Really looking at Jesus on the cross moves our hearts to see God's grace. We should be

looking at his cross every day. If we have a broken relationship with somebody, or some kind of hostility with others, we need to stop what we're doing and take a good, long look at Jesus on the cross. His vivid image on the cross has the power to drive out all our hatred, all our grudges, and enable us to forgive anyone from the heart. Even the symbol of the cross itself proclaims this good news. The vertical beam represents our restored relationship with God, and the horizontal beam, our relationships with others. The deeper we're reconciled to God, the deeper we can be reconciled with people. Conversely, if we've got lots of broken or hostile relationships, even if we know a lot, we'd better start wondering about our own relationship with God. Unity among believers is only possible through the cross of Jesus. Jesus didn't come to stir up hostility but to preach peace to all (17). Read verse 18. This is another verse in Ephesians about the Trinity: "Through him" is Jesus, when he gives us the Holy Spirit, we have access to the Father. It's true for anybody. There are no second-class citizens in the church; we're all one.

And what's the point? Read verse 19. Paul wanted these Gentile believers to find their identity among God's people. By faith in Jesus we're all members of the household of God. Nobody is an alien, a stranger or an outsider. No one doesn't belong. One day we're going to see this in heaven, where there will be people from every tribe and language and people and nation, all cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (Rev5:9). "Household" literally means "blood relatives." It's a diverse family, a blended family including mostly adoptive children. But in Christ, we have the closest bond possible, even stronger than family ties, bound together through the blood of Jesus. This is Paul's vision for the church, where human distinctions don't matter, where all believers are a spiritual family. We need to build up this family. How? We've got to change how we see people. We need to fully welcome anybody who believes. We need to love and prioritize them as family and make them feel like they truly belong.

Paul says more about this household. Look at verses 20–22. It's not a flimsy family. It has a rock solid foundation on Christ our cornerstone, as well as all his apostles and prophets. He's the one who joins us together and helps us grow into a holy temple in the Lord. He's the one who draws in new believers and builds them together with all his people into a place where God dwells by his Spirit.

Read verse 19 again. May God help us find our true identity in Christ as members of the household of God. May God help us welcome new believers as family. Most of all, may God help us look at the cross of Jesus honestly so that we can be really reconciled to God and to each other.