

<b>SCRIPTURE FOCUS</b>	<b>Ephesians 2:11-22</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>09.22.19</b>
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<b>LESSON SUMMARY</b>	In Christ, all ethnicities have been included. We should act like this is true!		

*all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted*

## ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

### A NOTE ON INCLUSION IN GOD'S FAMILY

After two thousand years of church history, we are used to the idea that people from every nation, tribe, and tongue are part of God's family. In the early days of the church an idea like this was revolutionary. Pretty much the entire Old Testament tells the story of *one* nation – the Jews. According to Genesis 12, God chose to have a special relationship with Abraham and Abraham's descendants. They would be his people and he would be their God. And they alone of all the nations of the earth would enjoy this special relationship. In this scheme, you have two types of people: Jews and Gentiles. The Jews are God's people. Gentiles are everyone else who aren't.

Now fast forward to Acts 15, and we see the newly founded Christian community facing a crisis of identity. At first, people assumed that God's work in Christ would extend as far as God's work of redemption had always extended – to the Jews. By Acts 15, though, something unexpected had taken place. Gentiles had put their faith in Christ and received the Holy Spirit! The faith had jumped ethnic boundaries. (See Acts 10-11.)

When we get to Acts 15, an important question is being asked in the Christian community. How should these Gentiles be received into God's people? Should they be allowed to come as they are, or should they become Jewish converts first? Conversion to Judaism would require males to be circumcised and for everyone to adhere to the specifics of the Jewish law. In the Christian community, there were people on both sides of this debate, and a special council was eventually called to decide the issue. That brings us to Acts 15.

Ultimately, the church decided that Gentiles should be allowed to come to Jesus as they were, without converting to Judaism. The logic here was that if God had imparted his Spirit to Gentiles without first requiring them to become Jewish converts, who was the church to put boundaries around this new movement of God? Inclusion in God's people was now available to Gentiles as well as Jews. The doors of redemption had been thrown wide open!

As with many debates, the decision at the council of Acts 15 was binding, but not everyone agreed. Some Jewish Christ-followers still preached that Gentiles must become Jews in order to be included in God's people, and this caused confusion and difficulty for some early Gentile Christians. The issue was so important that quite a bit of the NT ended up being dedicated to the it. The letter to the Galatians is a strong polemic against the "circumcision group," which was calling for Gentile Christians to be circumcised. The

issue shows up again in Philippians, and quite a bit of Romans is dedicated to explaining the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God's family. The Jew/Gentile theme also plays a large role in Ephesians, which speaks to the way Jesus transformed the Jew/Gentile divide in the cross.

**<sup>11</sup>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)—<sup>12</sup>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.**

In 2:1-3, Paul reminded the Ephesians of the human situation apart from Christ. Now, in 2:11-12, he reminds the Gentiles in his audience of their plight apart from Christ. First, he reminds them of the disdain the Jews had for them. This is what is meant by "the circumcision" (read here Jews) calling Gentiles "the uncircumcision." Basically, this language boiled Gentile identity down to their exclusion from God's family. (Circumcision was the sign of the covenant [see Gen 17]. To be uncircumcised was an implicit sign of exclusion.)

Even as Paul reminds the Gentile Ephesians of their low status in Jewish thought, however, he takes a dig at the thought process itself. Yes, he knows that circumcision is the mark of the covenant. He makes an important move, though, by speaking of the circumcision rite as a merely outward act ("made in flesh by hands). Moreover, he refers to the Gentiles in v 11 as "Gentiles in the flesh." With both of these descriptors, Paul is pointing to a deeper spiritual reality. As he will show, those who are Gentiles in the flesh have been included in God's family. (For a fuller look at Paul's view of circumcision, see Gal 5:2-6.)

Moving from unkind descriptors, Paul goes on to speak of the real plight of Gentiles before Christ. They 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." All this is to say that the Gentiles really were on the outside looking in when it came to God's work of salvation and his people. Before Christ, the Gentiles were excluded.

**<sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup>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, <sup>16</sup>and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup>He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup>For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**

In v 13, Paul changes gears. Having reminded the Gentiles of their pre-Christ situation, he moves now to speak of their newfound standing in Christ. As has been the case thus far in Ephesians, "in Christ" language plays a big part. Having been included in Christ, the Gentiles who were once "far off" have been brought near by Christ's blood.

How has Christ's blood brought Gentiles near? Vv 14-15 tell us that he has "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." If you look at commentaries, you'll find quite a bit of discussion about just what Paul is talking about. Two options end up being best. The wall is either referring to a real wall in the

Jerusalem temple that barred Gentiles from the inner courts<sup>1</sup> or it metaphorically refers to the Jewish Law, which was a real source of enmity between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> I personally have been around and around on this one, and in the end, I agree with a commentator named Ernest Best. Best argues that we are reaching a little bit too far when we try to identify the wall. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, there was real animosity between Jews and Gentiles for a number of reasons. The wall is simply a metaphor for the deep dislike that divided Jews and Gentiles.<sup>3</sup> Whichever way you take the passage, you end up with Christ putting hostility to death.

As the passage continues, we find that Christ has done away with the hostility between Jews and Gentiles by “setting aside ... the law with its commands and regulations.” This is a clear reference to the Torah, or Jewish Law, which was the basis for covenant relationship between God and the Jews. The Greek word for “set aside” can have the strong meaning of “destroy” or the softer meaning of “abolishing” or “nullifying.” The NIV does a good job of choosing the softer meaning. The idea here is that Christ in his death nullified the binding nature of the Law for the covenant. Now, a new covenant has been established in Jesus’ own blood (see Luke 22:20), and the Law has lost its place of prominence. With the Law nullified as the basis for faithfulness, a new future was possible in which Gentiles could be included without converting to Judaism!

In v 15, Paul extends the work of Christ beyond doing away with hostility between Jews and Gentiles. We learn now that he also actively unites the two! The whole purpose of all this, Paul says, was “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.” Remember that in Eph 2:1-10, being “in Christ” was integral to God’s work on our behalf. To be “in Christ” is to be incorporated into him, meaning that we are raised and exalted with him. Here, “in Christ” takes on a corporate dimension. In essence, when we find ourselves in Christ, we find ourselves there *with the others Christ has redeemed*, both Jew and Gentile. Thus, *everyone* who accepts Christ is brought to unity in Christ with all other Christians. I think here of the disciples. They were twelve guys who probably wouldn’t have hung out or even liked each other in normal life. They united around Jesus, though, as they followed him and named his as Lord. In a similar but deeper way, all Christians are ultimately united in Christ. In himself, Jesus has one new humanity.

In v 16, Paul shifts his focus from incorporation into Christ’s risen life to reconciliation to God through the cross. Really, these two realities aren’t far off from each other. In the cross, Christ stood in as our substitute, receiving in himself the penalty of sin. When we are incorporated into Christ, his substitutionary sacrifice covers us. Thus we all, both Jews and Gentiles, are reconciled to God on the same ground as we are all covered by Christ’s sacrifice and incorporated into his “one body,” or risen life. We might say here that the ground at the foot of the cross is level.

Having completed his unifying work, Jesus “came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who are near.” This “coming” probably refers to Jesus spreading the gospel through the apostles by the Spirit. The far/near language is reminiscent of Isaiah 52:7 and 57:19. Here, “near” refers to Jews, who have been the recipients of the “covenants of promise” (see 2:12), while “far” refers to Gentiles, who before

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<sup>1</sup> As Arnold explains: “Surrounding the inner courts was a four and one-half-foot-high wall, called the *soreg*, that separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Israelites ... and kept Gentiles from ever coming near the sanctuary ... This ‘dividing wall’ or ‘fence’ that surrounded the inner courts of the temple was an important symbol of the extraordinary division between Jew and Gentile.” Arnold, 159-160.

<sup>2</sup> Talbert, 79-81.

<sup>3</sup> Best, 253-257.

Christ were excluded from those same covenants. The point here is that the message of peace is for both Jews and Gentiles. It brings them peace with God and with one another.

In v18, Paul speaks of Jew/Gentile unity from a different angle. Through Christ, he says, both Jews and Gentiles have access to God through “one Spirit.” The idea is that all Christians, regardless of ethnic background, all share in the one Holy Spirit. This vantage point will come up again later in the letter.

<sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In v 19, Paul outlines what all of this means for the Ephesian Gentiles. Whereas they were once excluded (“strangers and aliens,” see also 2:11-12) from God’s people, they are now “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” This language celebrates Gentile inclusion with images of citizenship in God’s people and familial relationship in his household.

Paul follows up his talk of people and family with a new way of talking about unity. Not only are God’s people (both Jew and Gentile) his citizens and family, but they are also being built together into a house for God, or temple. The idea here is that each believer is a brick in God’s temple. In v 22, Paul reemphasizes that the Gentiles are included in this structure, and the Spirit once again takes center stage.

Concerning the temple that the Ephesian Gentiles are being built into, Jesus is its cornerstone,<sup>4</sup> meaning that he is the first stone laid and therefore gives shape to the rest of the building. Closely linked with Christ in the foundation of the temple are the “apostles and prophets.” They, of course, are secondary to Christ in the structure, but they are nevertheless important to the church. In all of this building language, we see a picture of interdependence among Christ’s people. We are all necessary to the building.

## TEACH THE TEXT

Ephesians 2:11-22 is the kind of passage where it is easy to get lost in the minutiae and lose the big picture. I actually did that myself by getting hung up on “the dividing wall of hostility” as I wrote this lesson plan. While focus on these issues is good and sometimes necessary, this passage has much to offer when we choose to see the forest rather than focusing on individual trees. When we take the passage as a whole, we find remarkable truths about race and unity.

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<sup>4</sup> You may have heard some talk of “cornerstone” in this and other passages being translated “capstone.” While a cornerstone is the part of the foundation that gives shape to everything else, a capstone is the final stone that joins an arch together. While depicting Jesus as the final, unifying stone is a nice image, cornerstone is the better translation. As cornerstone, Jesus gives shape to rather than just finishing the unified work of the church. Also, cornerstone imagery draws from Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16 (1 Peter 2 draws on both of these passages when speaking similarly of the church). In the case of Isaiah 28:16, the stone in question is part of the foundation, making it a cornerstone.

## RACE

In my mind, Eph 2:11-22 and 3:1-13 are the two of the most important NT passages on the subject of race. In 2:11-22, Paul outlines the grounds for Gentile inclusion in God's people. Remember that before Christ the Jews alone were the special people of God. Thus, inclusion in God's people was very much an ethnic matter (though non-Jews could be included through conversion to Judaism), and Gentiles, a catch all term for all non-Jews, were excluded. This divide led to Jewish elitism as Jews looked down on the Gentiles, who were outside the covenant and did not have the Law, and Gentile disdain for the Jews, whom they viewed as separatists because Jews refused to engage fully in society (due to the constraints of the Law). In Christ, the Gentiles are included and the animosity is put to death. A new humanity has been created in him that includes people from all ethnicities.

Today, in a time of racial tensions, it is paramount that the church remember these truths. In Christ, there simply is no room for racism. Rather, believers of all colors have been included in Christ and are bound together with ties deeper than ethnicity. An important question for Christians today is how we can love and affirm our brothers and sisters in Christ who are not like us. To fail to ask this question and act on it is to deny the new reality that Christ has forged at great cost to himself. The cross means reconciliation with God *and* reconciliation with people. Faithfulness requires that we take both seriously.

Importantly, inclusion in Christ does not erase ethnic identity, nor does it make ethnic heritage unimportant. Instead, all ethnicities are allowed to thrive in Christ. When we think of the new humanity Christ has created, we are talking about the riches of all nations being gathered together in him. And we are talking about a deep, unbreakable God between all of us.

## UNITY

More generally, Ephesians 2:11-22 raises questions about unity. The reality is that we are found in Christ with people who are and are not like us. We care called to love them all! So, what does it mean for churches of different ethnicities to affirm one another? What does unity mean within congregations themselves? The spiritual realities that Christ has wrought permeate pretty much all of our relationships!

Of course, unity is not easy, and there are no easy answers. Unity, however, is of paramount importance for the church today.

## A LAST WORD

If you decide to get into issues of race, tread very carefully. Rather than getting into debates informed by today's politics, keep pointing back at the text. The idea is to keep the conversation on firmly Christian ground, which means that the cross and new humanity must always loom large in the background of our conversations. A couple of tactics for keeping the conversation on track: (1) If political issues come up, ask "What do you think Jesus would say about that?" (2) When people try to take the conversation into unhelpful territory, gently remind them that Ephesians is the topic of conversation and steer conversation back to the text.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

## Vv 11-12

1. What does Paul mean when he talks about circumcision in this passage?
2. What does it mean that Gentiles were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and all the rest?

## Vv 13-16

1. What has changed Gentiles' standing? How?
2. What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus has created in himself one humanity from the two?
3. What did this mean on the ground in the early church?
4. What does this mean on the ground today?
5. How does this passage inform the racial tensions in the US today?
6. Does new humanity erase ethnicity?
7. Do you think the church lives up to the truth of unity in Christ well?

## Vv 17-22

1. What does it mean that Christ preached peace to those far off and those near?
2. Why is the Spirit important when we talk about unity?
3. What is the new status of Gentiles because of Christ?
4. What can we learn from the building imagery in 20-22?

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