

taking action!

small group material



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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

UNITY • Becoming Mature in Community

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Ephesians 4:1-16

Background

Ephesians is divided into two sections. In the first section (chapters 1-3) Paul describes what God has done for us for us in Christ. In the second section (chapters 4-6) he describes what it looks like when we live our lives in light of what God has done.

In 4:1-16 Paul addresses what could be either a great obstacle or a great aid to our growing to maturity in Christ: diversity in the body. When we recognize and appreciate the differences that exist among God's people we avail ourselves of the enormous good that comes from living in community with other believers. But if by our sin we allow those differences to be a source of disunity we hinder God's purpose in our life and in the world.

Paul begins chapter 4 with the word "therefore," which is meant to link all that has been said before with what is about to be taught. God has forgiven us, lavished us with love, and created one new body of believers comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. In order for that diverse body to mature and spread the gospel throughout the earth, it must be unified.

Conduct that Leads to Unity

Paul begins by addressing four character traits that foster unity. Humility is a willingness to take little honor and to give a higher place to another (non-self-assertion). Gentleness speaks of a demeanor that is not abrasive or harsh. Patience is a long holding out of the mind before it gives room to action, passion, or retaliation. Bearing with one another is putting up with the shortcomings and idiosyncrasies of others.

Paul exhorts them to "make every effort" to pursue unity. By this, he is asking everyone to seek to manifest this behavior and pursue community. Relationships are the primary context in which God grows us. A lack of humility, gentleness, patience and love can destroy that community.

What Unifies Us

Talk about unity is rather fruitless, if, in the final analysis, we have nothing that unifies us. Paul gives a list of seven things that unify all believers: they are members of the same body (Christ's), and they have the same Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and Father. His repetition of the word "one" is to emphasize that in these major respects, they really are unified (one).

What's the Big Idea?

God calls believers to live in a manner worthy of His calling by preserving the unity of the body and using the gifts Christ provided to build up His body so that they will all move toward maturity.

What's the Problem?

This may sound odd but God has not given you personally everything you need to grow to maturity. He has brought you into a new community: the church. You can only become who He wants you to be in the context of this community. Our inability to get along with other believers not only hinders our spiritual growth but it also prevents this community from becoming what God wants it to be. Paul identifies character qualities crucial to unity: humility, gentleness and patience. It's not hard to think about how the opposite of these Spirit-enabled qualities (pride, harshness and impatience) rend the fabric of Christian community. This passage is particularly challenging for us in the West who place a premium on independence.





Some take this to be doctrinal accord: that all Christians share this same list of beliefs. To some extent, this is true. However, the focus is more experiential. This means that as Christians we have the same Holy Spirit indwelling us; we have the same Father; and we walk daily with the same Savior. In other words, we participate in a common experience with the same person (God) whom we all know. Surely, this is ample ground to create unity among Christians from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Diverse Gifts

Unity is not to be equated with “sameness.” Paul moves on to describe how God has gifted each of us with spiritual gifts that are different and unique. This is what he means when he states, “that to each one of us grace has been given.” Paul is exhorting the good of those differences which we sometimes find to be sources of annoyance.

Nowhere in Scripture is there a complete list of all of the spiritual gifts. Gifts are also mentioned in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and 1 Peter 4. There may be others that aren’t specifically listed. The bottom line is that we’ve all been given different gifts which we are to use to love and serve others, so that all can grow to maturity.

Often, the way we discover our gifts is in the context of actually seeking to serve our Christian community. Differing situations, roles, and problems seem to tease out our area of gifting. Most people will never discover their spiritual gifts unless they actively engage in Christian service over time.

Maturity through Unity and Diversity

Paul states that we are to use our gifts so “the body of Christ will be built up until we all reach unity.” Unity and maturity are the end goals of diversity. This maturity is characterized by a strong and sound faith brought about through good biblical teaching, and Christians characterized by “speaking the truth” to one another from genuine love. The opposite picture Paul paints is of an unstable community that is easy prey for false teaching and false teachers.

What’s Our Response?

The point of the study is unity. As a major application, the group should think through what specific ways they could serve within the community of believers of which they are a part.

They should also see that making unity happen is their responsibility. And that they should do whatever is in their power to keep the group unified.

What Are the Questions?

Ephesians 4:1-16

LAUNCH

Tell us about someone who has made a significant impact upon your life. It could be a teacher, a friend, etc.

EXPLORE

Read 4:1-3

1. Paul has just finished describing all God has done for us in chapters 1-3. How does he exhort us to respond to what God has done for us in v.1?
2. According to vv. 2-6, how are we to “walk worthy of our calling”?
3. What is the goal of living this lifestyle?
4. Why do you think that Paul starts by addressing unity in our relationships with others? What does that suggest about the role of Christian community for our spiritual growth?

Read 4:4-6

5. How many “ones” do you count? What is the point Paul is trying to make with this emphasis?
6. What is Paul saying is the basis for our unity?

Read 4:7-16

7. What is the “grace” that each believer has received in v.7? How does it differ from the grace of salvation Paul describes in Ephesians 2:8?
8. What gifts did Christ give and to whom were they given?
9. In vv. 11-13 how does Paul describe the process by which we move toward maturity?
10. What does this process reveal about the necessity of Christian community for our spiritual growth?
11. If we were to ask Paul, “Why is Christian community so important for our spiritual growth?” what would he say?

APPLY

12. What are the greatest gifts, skills or talents you personally can offer your Christian community? In what ways have you attempted to serve through your gifts?
13. How does this passage invite us to think differently about Christian growth?
14. What might a community that lives out the vision Paul describes in these verses look like?
15. What would it look like for you to live out Christian community in the way Paul describes? What might change in your life?
16. Paul invites us to know and experience Christ more deeply through significant involvement in the lives of other believers. What heart attitudes or sin tendencies in your life produce resistance to embracing other believers, thereby missing out on Christ’s provision for your spiritual growth?

What Are the Answers?

1. We are to live “worthy of our calling.” He is exhorting us to live in a manner that reflects our new identity in Christ.
2. Humility, gentleness, patience, and love are called for.
3. Christian community plays a foundational role in our spiritual growth.
4. Again, let them wrestle with this; the answer does not come become obvious until Paul gets to vv. 12-16. If they are not unified, they cannot grow.
5. There are seven “ones.” They really are “one” on the most important things.
6. Our common doctrine and especially our common experience of those realities.
7. We want to help them see that in this verse, grace takes the form of spiritual gifts given to each believer. We tend to limit “grace” to what God does for us in salvation. It is important to see in this passage that grace plays vital roles in our growth as well.
8. You might point out that the leaders Paul identifies are not the only gifts the NT describes (see 1 Cor 12). In this context, Paul focuses only on these four categories of gifts because of what he wants to say about the process by which we grow.
9. Make sure they see the progression: (1) leaders equip the saints, (2) saints do the ministry and (3) the body of Christ is built up. It is not leaders who build the church but rather the “saints.”
10. You might encourage them to consider how the image of the church as “Christ’s body” (v. 12) underscores this point.
11. You cannot become the person God has called you to be apart from involvement in the lives of other believers. Other believers cannot become who God has called them to be apart from your involvement in their lives. Therefore, we must protect Christian unity and use our gifts to build the body of Christ.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. It challenges individualism. Community is vital to growth.
14. They may talk about how great it would be. However, if we really stepped into one another’s lives, there would likely be more conflict which is why Paul’s exhortations about Christian unity are so important.
15. Now we’re making it personal.
16. You’re asking them to consider what the passage exposes about their heart; we want them to see that these heart attitudes represent heart-resistance to Christ.

Memorize

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
Ephesians 4:2