




THE COMMUNITY

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,

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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.

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and Father. His repetition of the word “one” is to emphasize that in these major respects, they really are unified (one).

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, 1Corinthians 12, and 1Peter 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.

Ephesians 4:1-16

The Questions

Q: As you read through this passage, what jumps out as significant to you?

A: Allow your group to discuss. Keep an open ear to what they saw in the passage.

Q: As you read this passage, what is difficult for you to understand?

A: This will help you understand where members of your group aren't picking up on the message. Encourage others in the group to give their best guess as to the answer.

Q: Ephesians is neatly divided up into two sections. Chapters 1-3 tell us what God has done. Chapters 4-6 answers the question, "How should we live in light of what God has done?" How would you summarize Paul's first thought in light of all God has done?

*A: Help your group see that **unity** plays a central role in how we live. Specifically see 4:1-3 .*

Q: Read verses 4-6. How many "ones" do you count? If we share so much in common, why do you think Christians can deal with a great amount of division?

A: There are 7 "ones." Paul wants Christians to see just how much we have in common in belief and experience. On division...James is clear in James 4:1-4 and Paul is clear in Galatians 5:19-21 that our sin is the cause of such division.

Q: What are those things about which people, in general, divide so easily? How could a Christian community be a witness by practicing unity?

A: There could be so many answers here. Politics come to my mind quickly. Simply put, Christians are called to first and foremost love the person who thinks differently from them. They are to value their common bond in the Lord more than their ideology. If they do not, they likely idolize their ideology and need to repent.

Q: What attitudes or tendencies produce a resistance to embrace other Christians readily?

A: Help your group see that self-centeredness, tribalism, idolatry, love of conflict, etc all push us apart. Paul's remedy is to speak the truth in love (vs 15) to one another.

Q: In verses 11-13 how does Paul describe the process by which we move toward maturity?

A: 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 everyday Christian.

Q: What actions or attitudes is this passage challenging me to change?