

Week 5: Christ Reconciled Jews and Gentiles: Ephesians 2:11–22

Hook



Main Point: In Christ, God brought believing Gentiles into His family and His kingdom.

Q: What's the most unique food combination you love that most people think is a total mismatch?

Some people swear by peanut butter and pickles. Others love fries dipped in a milkshake. Chicken and waffles. Salt on watermelon. The first time you hear about those combinations, your reaction is usually, “There is no way those things belong together.”

And yet somehow, they do.

We naturally assume that things that are different don't belong together. We think opposites clash. But sometimes the most surprising combinations end up creating something better than either ingredient could have been on its own.

In Paul's day, there may have been no two groups that seemed less likely to belong together than Jews and Gentiles. They had different histories, different customs, different traditions, and generations of hostility between them. If you had asked most people in the first century whether those two groups could ever become one family, they probably would have laughed.

In today's lesson, Paul explains the seemingly unlikely unity that Jesus brings to these very divided groups.

RECAP: So far, we have learned about Paul's long relationship with the church at Ephesus as their spiritual father. He wrote to the Ephesians from prison to encourage them to live into their identity in Christ. He gave the Ephesians a succinct theological description of the Gospel: We were dead in our sins and God made us alive; God made us a new creation to do His good works in the world.

In this lesson, Paul will start to talk about God's plan and His heart for the Gentiles – the way Jesus brought them into God's family and brought unity between Jew and Gentile believers.

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Book

Main Point: In Christ, God brought believing Gentiles into His family and His kingdom.

Ephesians 2:11–12 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Before Christ, the Gentiles were far from God and had no hope.

Q: Why did the Gentiles have no hope before Christ came?

This section has a structure parallel to verses 1–10: Verses 1–10 discuss how the Gospel changes believers individually; verses 11–22 tells how the Gospel changed the Gentile Christians as a people. Both sections have a three-point structure: what they were like before Christ, what God did for them in Christ, and how their identity was now different:

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| 1) You were dead in your sins (vv. 1–3). | You were separated from God (vv. 11–12). |
| 2) God made you alive in Christ (vv. 4–9). | You were brought near in Christ (vv. 13–18). |
| 3) You are His workmanship (v. 10). | You are fellow citizens in His household and
a holy temple for His Spirit (vv. 19–22). |

In the first section, Paul painted a bleak picture of all believers before Christ: They were *dead* in their sins. In this section, his picture of the Gentiles before Christ is equally bleak: They had *no hope* (2:12). This does not mean the Jews were automatically saved; both Jews and Gentiles were equally dead in their sins (2:1–3). The difference was not spiritual merit but covenant privilege: God had graciously given Israel His promises, while the Gentiles, as a people, stood outside them.

In verses 11–12, Paul differentiated between Jew and Gentile so he could later emphasize their unity in Christ. The Gentiles were “without God” and “strangers to the covenants of promise.” Beginning with God’s promise to Abraham, these covenants assured Israel of a nation, a land, a King, and spiritual blessing—all ultimately centered in the Messiah.¹ The Gentiles had no such revealed promises or assured hope; the “gods” they put their hope in were empty idols that could not save (Isaiah 46:7). Yet God’s promise to Abraham always included His plan to bless *all* the families of the earth through Abraham’s descendant, Jesus Christ (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:16).

Circumcision was the outward sign of God’s covenant with Abraham. Every male in every Jewish household was to be circumcised, including foreigners who had joined them, as a sign that they were God’s set-apart people (Genesis 17:1–14; Exodus 12:48). In these verses, Paul’s language of “Gentiles in the flesh” and circumcision, which is “made in the flesh,” emphasized the outward, physical distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

Outward circumcision, however, did not make someone spiritually right with God. Verses 1–3 establish that both groups were spiritually dead apart from Christ. Israel had been set apart as God’s covenant people and enjoyed His presence among them in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:8; 40:34–38), while the Gentiles remained alienated from God’s covenant community and promises. Through the cross, however, Christ reconciled believing Jews and Gentiles to God in one body (2:16), and through Him both now have access to the Father by one Spirit (2:18).

Today, the decisive distinction is between those who are in Christ and those who are not. Those who do not know Jesus have no true hope in this world or in eternity (1 Thessalonians 4:13). They may think they have hope, but they are putting their hope in the things of this world—the things “of the flesh” that will not last into eternity (Matthew 6:19–21). God brings people real and lasting hope through the Gospel, which He has entrusted us to proclaim. As followers of Jesus, it is our mission to share the good news of this hope with everyone around us (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; Romans 10:14; 1 Peter 3:15).

Q: What worldly things do people put their hope in and how are they false hope?

Q: How could thinking of witnessing as sharing hope change the way we think about evangelism? How would you describe the hope you have in Christ?

Q: Has God ever used you to share His hope with someone? Share your experience with the group.

Ephesians 2:13–18 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God has made Jewish believers and Gentile believers one in Christ.

Q: How did Jesus not only reconcile people to God but to one another?

Q: How did God break down the “dividing wall of hostility” in Christ?

Having described the Gentiles’ hopeless condition apart from Christ, Paul now explained Christ’s work in two closely related ways: (1) Christ brought the Gentiles, who had formerly been far from God, near through His blood (2:13); and (2) Christ made Jewish and Gentile believers one new man and reconciled both groups to God in one body (2:14–16).

Under the old covenant, God set Israel apart from the surrounding nations to preserve its holiness and enable it to bear witness to the true God—not to authorize hatred or spiritual superiority. God promised that Abraham would bless the nations and called Israel to be a light to them (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 49:6).

The Mosaic law marked a real dividing line between Jew and Gentile: the Jews possessed God's written law, whereas the Gentiles lived without it and thus did not keep it (2:15). In particular, the ceremonial law set Israel apart through its dietary restrictions, purification requirements, sacrifices, festivals, and other outward ordinances. These distinctions restricted ordinary fellowship and formed a genuine barrier between the two groups. Sinful pride then turned that separation into mutual hostility.

Christ did not merely make peace; He Himself is our peace (2:14). Through the cross, He rendered the Mosaic law inoperative as a barrier between Jew and Gentile. Jesus removed the ceremonial ordinances that had functioned as boundary markers between them, put their hostility to death, and created one new people in Himself (2:14–16).² Because salvation comes through faith in Jesus, there is no longer any basis for spiritual superiority between believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Acts 15 applied this truth by affirming that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish proselytes in order to be saved (Acts 15:10–11).

Having accomplished peace through the cross, Christ proclaimed peace to Gentiles who were “far off” and Jews who were “near.” Neither group can approach God apart from Him. Through the Son, both have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:17–18).

This is the *corporate* reconciliation of the gospel. No ethnic, social, or cultural distinction gives one believer greater access to God, spiritual standing, or worth than another (Galatians 3:28). Physical and cultural differences remain, but they do not divide Christ's body. There is no place for any sense of superiority of one group over another. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

Q: What “dividing walls of hostility” does our culture put up between people today? How have you seen some groups display a sense of superiority over others?

Q: How have you seen division in the Church in other ways? In what specific ways can we work toward unity in the Church?

Q: How can we, as Christians, dispel division in our world without compromising godly standards?

Ephesians 2:19–22 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Together, Jewish believers and Gentile believers were being built into the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Q: How have Gentiles' identities been changed in Christ?

Q: What does it mean to be the temple of the Holy Spirit together?

Now that Paul had broken down all that deep theology, he explained how their identity had changed in Christ. He was speaking to the Gentiles when he said “you” are no longer foreigners but citizens of the kingdom. He also specified that they were “fellow citizens” with the other (Jewish) saints, again emphasizing that we are all one in Christ Jesus (2:19). This “citizen” terminology emphasizes that their identity was now found in Christ and His kingdom. But then He shifted to the metaphor of the Church as a building, the temple of God.

In the old covenant the temple was the “house” of God, the place His Spirit dwelled among His people on earth (2 Samuel 7:5–7). So, Paul wrote that we are members of God’s household as a dual meaning: we have been adopted into His family as His children, but we are also stones in the building of His “house” or temple (1 Corinthians 3:9). This is another way Paul described the Gospel as both individual and corporate. In the old covenant, God’s Spirit dwelled among His people in the tabernacle and later, the temple (Exodus 25:8). In the new covenant, His Spirit dwells inside us, our very bodies (John 14:16–17; 1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Paul taught that this is not only an individual thing. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit *individually*, but also, all believers *together* are the temple of the Holy Spirit.³

We are “being built together” into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (2:22). Christ Himself is the cornerstone – the first block that was laid, the one who set the pattern for all others, the one all other stones depend on to make sure they are plumb and level.⁴ Christ is the One to whom we all look as our model of how to live as temples of the Holy Spirit. He is also the stone that holds the rest of the building together. We are one *in Christ*; it is our relationship with Him that binds us together in unity. Nothing else could keep such different people unified the way Christ brings people together in unity of purpose, mission and love. It is only through the self-sacrificing *agape* love of Christ that we can have the humility required to live in unity with those who are so different from us.

Together we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and *together* we are the body of Christ. Both pictures make the same point: Christianity is not an individual faith; it is a communal one. We need one another to represent Jesus in the world, including believers who are different from us. As Paul explained, the eye cannot say to the ear, “I don’t need you,” nor can the hand say that to the feet. Every part is needed for the body to function properly (1 Corinthians 12:14–21). In the same way, each believer is a living stone whom God fits into the temple He is building (1 Peter 2:5). With Christ as the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets form the foundation through the truth they proclaimed about Him (2:20).⁵ As God works through each of us to build up His Church, our good works display His glory to the world (Matthew 5:16).

Because this new-covenant temple is made of people rather than stone, it goes wherever God’s people go. In that sense, we are God’s “mobile home”: Wherever we go, His Spirit dwells within us and works through us. This is how we participate with

Christ in His ministry of reconciliation as His ambassadors in the world (2 Corinthians 5:20). But this is not work we do alone or in our own strength; it is the work of the whole body of Christ, empowered by God. The verbs in this passage are passive: The building is “being joined together,” and we are “being built together” (2:21–22). As God’s Spirit works *in* us to make us more like Jesus, He also works *through* us to make Jesus known to the world.

Q: How does it affect your identity and your calling to think of yourself as just one stone in the temple God is building? Or just one part of the body of Christ?

Q: How would it change the way you lived if you woke up every morning and thought of yourself as God’s “mobile home,” taking His Spirit with you into the world?

Q: How can our LifeGroup help and encourage you in your journey of being the temple of the Holy Spirit?

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Took

Main Point: In Christ, God brought believing Gentiles into His family and His kingdom.

Ask God to reveal any sinful barriers you may have allowed to develop in your relationships—pride, prejudice, bitterness or an unwillingness to forgive. Is there a fellow believer you have avoided, judged or treated like an outsider? Is there a sin you need to confess or a relationship in which you should pursue reconciliation? Take one step toward unity this week. Make the phone call. Start the conversation. Confess your wrong. Be ready to forgive. Invite someone to lunch. As far as it depends on you, pursue peace and show others the grace Christ has shown you (Romans 12:18).

The Gospel first brings sinners near to God through Christ, but it also joins everyone who believes into one body. We do not create the unity for which Christ died; we are called to preserve it and make it visible in the way we love one another.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on what it means to live as a “mobile home” for the Holy Spirit. Because He dwells in you, how should His presence shape your words, choices, work, and relationships? What might change if you began each day resolved to walk by the Spirit and let Christ’s light shine through you wherever you live, work, and play?

PRAY: Thank God for the reconciliation He has brought in your life – both with Himself and with others. Pray for God to break down any dividing walls of hostility you have in your life. Ask Him to give you the humility to reach out to anyone with whom you are divided. Pray for God to break down any dividing walls that may be in our local church. Ask Him to break down dividing walls in the universal Church. Pray for the Church to grow in unity.

ACT: Break down walls. Ask God to reveal to you any dividing walls of hostility there may be in your life, your family or your community. Ask Him to show you how to work to break down those dividing walls and build unity in the Church.

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, “Ephesians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 625.

² Hoehner, “Ephesians,” 626; Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2265.

³ Hoehner, “Ephesians,” 628.

⁴ Hoehner, “Ephesians,” 627.

⁵ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 63–65; Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2266.