

# What Makes Us a Family

Well, great to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of Ephesians, chapter 2. If you missed last week, we began a new teaching series called *Church is a Family*, which is all about how we relate to one another as followers of Jesus. In last week's teaching, we mentioned how *by far, the most common idea in the bible for understanding the Church, is the idea of a family*. That's what the church *is* in God's mind: his family. But we were careful to specify that by that, the bible doesn't mean we should function like a *modern American* family, but rather like an *ancient Mediterranean* family. In short, families back in Jesus' day were a *much* bigger deal than they are in much of our society today. Your relationship with your family was *the strongest* relationship you had—in most cases, even stronger than the relationship between husband and wife. So when Jesus says that we are to relate to one another like a *family*, that is no small statement. It means that we are being invited to re-orient our lives for the good of those God has put around us. And we spent most of our time last week exploring what all that means *practically*, to relate to one another like a family. And all of that was very important to just know what we're talking about for the rest of this series.

But at the same time, starting there is sort of to put the cart before the horse. Because **to truly become that type of a family, we need to understand what it is that makes us a family in the first place**. So now that there are these random people around us that we are now called to live in deep, meaningful relationship with, the question we might have is "why?" *Why* should I live in deep, meaningful relationships with people I don't necessarily have much in common with? Like, what if I'd rather *not*? What if I don't *like them* all that much? What if there are things about them I don't particularly care for? What if they happen to be an *Alabama* fan? What if they actually *like* the music that Pitbull puts out? What if they are the type of person who is *glad* that Adam Sandler is still making movies? What if they happen to be the most socially awkward human being alive? What if *I* am the most awkward human being alive, and they are completely normal? How should we go about living alongside these various types of people?

More legitimately, what if we see a lot of things *differently* from them? What if we are in very different stages of life? What if we come from very different socioeconomic backgrounds? What if we think about parenting or politics or finances very differently from one another? In a nutshell, why should I put forth the effort it will take to be *family* with people, when doing that is really difficult to do? **This approach to relationships with one another—that of a family—is no small feat to pull off. Especially when the**

**people you're given to be family with are very different than us.** So today, I want us to talk about what it is that *motivates* and *enables* these types of relationships, even when it might be really hard work.

And in order to do that, I want us to look at a passage from Ephesians 2. Before we read some of it, let me just give you a little bit of the background on it, so that you can see its relevance to our conversation today. The book of Ephesians is actually a *letter*, written to a relatively new church in the ancient city of Ephesus. A guy named Paul—one of the leaders of the early Church—writes this letter to encourage the people in the church there to remind them of some things, encourage them in some things, and also to address some issues that they are likely experiencing.

Now **one of those issues was the relationship between Jewish Christians, and Gentile Christians.** It's probably difficult for us today to understand how much of a practical problem that was to them at the time, but it was *massive*. We don't really have a great *one-to-one* comparison, but just to get a *glimpse* of it, think about all the conflict and unrest there is in *our country* right now between people of different *political persuasions*: between those who are conservative, and those who are liberal or progressive. Think of all the *skepticism* there is from each group towards the other, all the back and forth, and name-calling, and bickering, and accusations made. Now take that, and multiply it by at least a factor of 5 or so, and add hundreds more years of backstory to it. I think once you do that, you're starting to get a picture of what the relationship between Jews and Gentiles often felt like at the time that Ephesians was written.

**Here were these two very different groups of people. People who thought about themselves very differently, people who thought about the world around them very differently, people who just approached life differently. But God saw it fit to knit them together into one church family.** And practically speaking, that was creating some *tension* in regards to how they could *become* that family, together.

And so Paul writes especially chapter 2—the part of the letter we're about to read—to help them navigate that particular issue. So while it may not seem like a passage about the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians would have much relevance to us today, I would bet it actually has all sorts of relevance for how we relate to people who are different than us, and even to those who are *very* different from us. So we'll unpack the specifics of all that before we're done. But first, let's just work our way through what Paul says to them. Look with me at ch. 2, starting in v. 14:

[14] For **he himself** is our peace—

Anybody want to take a guess who that “he himself” is referring to? Yeah, *Jesus*. Which is just always the answer you guess when you’re in church. 90% of the time, even if it’s in some roundabout way, you’ll be right. ~~And even if it’s *not* the right answer to the question, just shout out “Jesus” and people will be like “man—they’re having a really powerful experience right now—that’s awesome.”~~ But Paul’s point is that **Jesus himself is our peace**. Now that word “*peace*” is not just talking about the absence of *conflict*. It’s not just talking about us being *pleasant* to one another. It’s actually talking about active, ongoing *love* and *acceptance* between them. Not just “yeah, we put up with each other,” but “we embrace and accept one another fully.” Paul says *that* is what Jesus came to generate between these two groups of people. That’s no small statement. He is about to go on to elaborate on the details of it. Keep reading, in v, 14:

*[He himself is our peace]...who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [note: there was apparently hostility between these two people groups. Substantial differences with one another that resulted in a deep distrust and contempt. But Jesus addressed that, v. 15...] [15] by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16] and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*

So here, Paul is obviously referring to Jesus’ *death* on the cross. Now it’s easy for us to think about the cross *mainly* in terms of what it did for our *individual* relationships with *God*: that the cross forgives me of my sin, and through that, that it sets things right once and for all between me and God himself. And all of that is entirely true—*beautifully* true, in fact. That is all *core* to the message of the gospel. But if you’re paying attention to what Paul is saying *here*, there also apparently is *another* dimension to what was accomplished on the cross. That **on the cross, God was not only setting things right between him and us individually, but was also making a way for things to be made right between us individually and other individuals**. In Paul’s language, he was “reconciling us *both to God in one body through the cross, killing the hostility*” between us. The cross provides a path for us to be made right with other people.

Put another way, one thing the cross is about is *justification*: the theological concept of us being made right with *God* through Jesus, being seen as righteous in his sight

because of the cross. *Justification* is central to the message of Jesus. But according to the language in *this* passage, the cross not only *justifies* us, but—if I could make up a word that I’m 100% positive will *not ever* catch on—the cross also **“familyfies” us**. It makes us a family. It takes very different people from very different backgrounds, and even those with outright *hostility* towards one another, and makes them *family* together.

It makes them “one,” in Paul’s language. In the original language, uses the phrase “one new *humanity*.” Now, just in case anybody mishears that, that *doesn’t mean* that the cross *does away with* the things that make us *diverse* and *different* and *unique*. He’s not trying to say that God creates some sort of big group of homogenous people that all think and act and speak exactly alike. *That’s* not Paul’s point. His point is that **God takes all these people with all these beautiful differences and distinctions, and he gives them the ability to live together with this love and acceptance of one another, despite their differences.** So it’s not *uniformity*, but it is *unity*.

So currently our three year old Whit has a favorite book called *God’s Very Good Idea*.<sup>1</sup> And the concept behind the book is that God’s “very good idea” was to have a whole bunch of different people who are all a part of his family. Whit absolutely loves this book—we read it almost every single night. Don’t read too much into that as far as me doing a good job as a parent though. After all, his other favorite book is *Big Dog Little Dog*, which is literally a book about absolutely nothing at all. So make of that what you will. But nearly every night we read this *other* book called *God’s Very Good Idea*, and it talks about how we can all be one family because “we are all different, but we are also all the same.” And what it means is that we are all *different* in that we come from different backgrounds and perspectives and stages of life and interests and personalities—but we are all the *same* in that we are all *made* in God’s image, we have all been *broken* by sin, and we are all in *need* of Jesus’ work on the cross on our behalf. And because of *those* things being the *same*, we can enjoy and appreciate all the *other* things that are *different* about one another.

And I think that is such a beautifully simple way of explaining to kids what Paul is saying in this passage. That God takes very different people, and through the cross of Jesus, puts them at *peace* with one another. Does that make sense? Keep reading with me in v. 17:

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<sup>1</sup> The book is available [here](#) for anyone interested.

[17] And he [again, that's Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. [18] For through him we **both** have access in **one Spirit** to the Father. [19] **So then** [everybody say "so then..." You guys are still awake, I love it. **So then**—in light of everything Paul has just said about the nature of what God accomplished through the cross, back in v. 19...] you **are no longer strangers and aliens** [you are no longer estranged from God or from one another], but you are **fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God**—

That word "household" means exactly what it *sounds* like: it means the group of people that make up a *home*. It's talking about a *family*. Because of what Jesus has done for them on the cross, these two very *different* groups of people are now *family* with one another. What a shift that is. Not just "hey guys, try to get along, if you don't mind—but rather *you are now a family together.*"

Now look with me at this next verse, because Paul gives us one more picture for understanding how all of this works. Paul says that this new *family* God is creating is, v. 20...

[20] **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets** [that's the earliest leaders of the Church...], **Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone**—

Okay, so let's figure out what Paul means *here*, and then we'll talk for a bit about what all of this means for *us*. He calls Jesus the "*cornerstone*" on which this new church family—this new "household"—is *built*. A *cornerstone*, back in the day, was the *first stone* laid when constructing any building. They didn't have the same sophisticated tools and building methods back then that we have today. So what you would do if you were a builder, is that before you started building, you would get a stonemason to chisel out a stone with exactly the right proportions and specifically, *angles*, on it—called a *cornerstone*. You'd lay that stone in place first, and then every other stone laid to construct the building was based on that *cornerstone*. So if the proportions and angles were off in that *cornerstone*, the whole building was off. But if the proportions and angles in it were *right*, the whole building was right.

So when Paul says that Jesus is the **cornerstone** of a church, what he's saying is that Jesus is the basis and the guide for this new family that God is creating. Jesus and his work on the cross are the basis for everything related to being a church family together. He is what *makes us* a family. Without him, none of it makes

much sense. Without Jesus, there's not much reason that a whole bunch of different people, from a whole bunch of different backgrounds, in a whole bunch of different life stages, would all live life together as one family. But *with* him, *all* of it begins to make sense. *With* Jesus as the cornerstone, we become one big, beautiful, diverse family. Jesus was able to bring even these two *very* different groups in the Ephesian church—Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—with all of their history and hostility and differences—and make them into a family.

Okay. So with that, let's take a big step back and talk about what all that might mean practically for you and I today. I think there are probably all sorts of implications we could draw out from this passage. I think it probably has all sorts of implications for how we think about *race* and the difference *between* races—that's one of the primary things Paul was addressing in the Ephesian church. I think it probably has all sorts of implications on how we think about salvation and the *communal nature* of salvation. And probably all sorts of other implications. All sorts of things we could draw out from this passage.

But for *today*, I've got one *big* takeaway from this passage that I think will probably be relevant on some level to everybody in this room. I want us to talk for a bit about the difference between *chemistry* and *community*. **Chemistry and community are actually two different things, but I think we often confuse them with one another.** *Chemistry* is the immediate feeling of connection you get when you hang out with somebody *similar* to you. It's when you meet someone and think, "I like you—you remind me of *me*!" Chemistry is based on things you have in *common* with another person or *group* of people, whether it's being in the same stage of life, or having similar interests, or being in the same line of work as them—or nearly anything else. **Chemistry is a connection with someone else, based on *similarities* between you and them.**

So for me personally, I have a ton of *chemistry* with other pastors and church leaders here in our city. I have a number of friendships with other pastors—from Dominique who you guys will actually get to hear from next Sunday, to Jason Hayes out west at Shoreline Church, to Aaron Loy who is planting a church in South Knoxville and offices with us—I have all these *friendships* with other Knoxville pastors. And part of that is because I have a lot of *chemistry* with them. If we get together for lunch, we have *tons* to talk about, because we're in the same line of work. And not only that, but we are similar in the *type* of churches we lead. So I can sit down with any of them, and we could probably spend *hours* talking about work, and church, and life, and theology, and books we're reading. We *very naturally connect* with one another because there's an inherent *chemistry* there—we have plenty of things in common.

But that being said, as beneficial as those relationships are, I *wouldn't* consider those guys to be my *community*. I don't see them *often* enough for it to be that. We don't share *life* consistently enough to be considered one another's community. They don't know a lot of the deepest parts of me and the day-in, day-out nature of my discipleship to Jesus. That's just not the nature of our relationship with each other: we have *chemistry*, but that doesn't necessarily make us *community*. Make sense so far?

But that being said, I *do* have *community* with a guy named Michael in my LifeGroup. Now on the surface, you wouldn't expect a guy like me and a guy like Michael to have much *chemistry* with one another. I'm 32; he's an age that he prefers I call "somewhere north of 50." I'm married; he's single. I'm an introvert; Michael is an extrovert, life of the party. When it comes to *music*, I'm really into really chill singer-songwriter, acoustic type stuff. I like the type of music that makes you feel like you are perpetually on a fall road trip driving through the mountains. Just really chill music. Michael blasts techno dance pop on his car speakers everywhere he goes. My point is that there are *a lot* of *differences* between me and Michael. If you were just picking two people to be in a friendship with one another, you probably wouldn't pair up me and Michael (unless you were doing casting for like an odd-couple buddy comedy or something). Because there's not much inherent *chemistry* between us. But that being said, I'll tell you this: **I have some of the most regular, meaningful, consistent *community* with Michael.** We regularly hang out. We regularly challenge one another to grow. We regularly help expose things in the other one that need to be exposed and repented of and owned up to. So even though I might not have much inherent *chemistry* with Michael—I do have *community* with him.

So there's a *difference* between chemistry and community. They're not the same thing. They're both good things to *desire*. They're both *helpful* to have. We're often at our best when we have both, and I *hope* you have both. **But they're not the same thing.** And perhaps most importantly, **they aren't requirements for one another. For instance, you can have plenty of *chemistry* with people, and still not have much *community* with them.** People you really enjoy being around regularly, but who don't necessarily know you all that well. **And...you can have *community* with people that you have no *chemistry* with.** Just like me and Michael. You can have rich, meaningful, deep friendships with people that you *don't naturally* "click" with at all. In fact, as I think back over my life, some of the relationships the Holy Spirit has used the most to mature me and form me into the image of Jesus, have been relationships with people that I didn't have very much in common with.

And the *dream* is to be able to combine the two, right? The dream is to be in *community* with people that we also have tons of *chemistry* with. That's probably what we'd all *prefer*. But at the same time, that's not always the way God orchestrates it. Sometimes he calls us to *community* with some people that we have very little *chemistry* with. So all that said, there are two concerns I have for those of us here today. **One concern is that some of us think we have genuine *community*, when really all we have is *chemistry*.** That we would think we're living in the type of community God calls us to, but really all it is is that we have a bunch of friends who are a lot like us. That's the first concern. And the *second* concern is that some of us are continually *running* from *community*, just to go and find more *chemistry*. **I would *hate* for us to ignore the *community* that God has put around us, in the name of just finding some people that are easier to hang out with.**

And here's why I have those concerns: if you're paying attention to what Ephesians 2 just told us, it's that **the building block—the *foundational cornerstone*—of genuine *community*, is actually *not* the *chemistry* we have with one another. It's the work of Jesus on the cross.** So when we say "oh I can't be in community with them—they're too different from me," I think that flat-out ignores the reconciling work of the gospel. Because in the gospel, God provided the basis for two *polar opposite* groups of people—Jews and Gentiles—to become *one* together. I mean, if you wanted to find two groups of people that had *no chemistry* with one another, this is it, right? Like, this is a *case study* in it. They could not be *more different*. But they had one very important thing in *common*: the good news of Jesus. And *that* was what made them a family.

**And listen: if Jesus could do that for *Jews and Gentiles*—for two groups of people with all that history, with all that bad blood between them—surely he can do it for us today.** Surely he can do that between *married* people and *unmarried* people. Surely he can do that between college students and empty nesters. Surely he can do it among black Christians and white Christians. Surely he can do it among Democrats and Republicans. **If the gospel is what makes *Jews and Gentiles* a family, it's what makes *us* a family too.** So if I could encourage you in one thing today, it would just be this. If you're a follower of Jesus, **fight the urge to think that the goal of life is to find more people like you to hang out with. Instead, intentionally *look* for ways that the gospel makes you "one" with those who are *unlike* you.**

So here at City Church, how do we put this into practice? We've discussed the *why* behind us being a family—let's talk for a bit, before we're done, about the *how*. I think



there are at least two things we can do practically to help remind ourselves of the “oneness” that the gospel makes possible. And really, they’re really just two sides of the same coin. First...

## **Confess sins, not just circumstances.**

Let me explain what I mean. Something I’ve noticed about myself is that when I’m talking with guys from my LifeGroup, even when I really am attempting to be honest about what I’m going through, I end up talking more about the *circumstances* of my life, than I talk about what I’m *struggling with* in my life. And those are actually different things. So if someone asks me “how are you?” I’ll respond by talking about *things happening* in my life: about specific ways that life with two kids is stressful, how Ana and I are having conflict in some aspect of our marriage, and how working as a pastor can sometimes be frustrating and discouraging.

And there’s nothing wrong with doing that—we hope that you do that if you’re a part of City Church. But I haven’t really confessed anything yet. I haven’t really talked about what God is doing or exposing or teaching me in the midst of all that. All I’ve done is just listed out my life circumstances. And also, **talking about my life in only those terms keeps anyone who’s not in my stage of life from identifying with what I’m going through.** It boxes other people out. Because by doing it that way, I’ve just inadvertently communicated that to understand what I’m going through is unique to *me*. That in order to understand it, you have to be a parent of at least two kids, married, and a pastor by profession. So anybody I’m talking to who *isn’t* one of those three things doesn’t feel like they have much to offer in response. Because I’ve confessed *circumstances*, not *sins*.

But track with me here. **What if I still talked about all of those same *things*, but I actually spent time examining what’s *behind* all of them too? What if I didn’t just vent my frustrations about life, but also tried to uncover what God is teaching me and showing me through them?** What if, instead of just saying “life with two kids is stressful,” I said “life with two kids is stressful, and what I think that is showing me is that I don’t do a great job of prioritizing my time on a regular basis.” Well all of a sudden, *that’s* something that most *anybody* can identify with, whether they have kids or not. What, if instead of saying “Ana and I are having conflict,” I said “Ana and I are having conflict, and I think it’s because I am very self-righteous and impatient towards her, and that *generates* conflict”? Other people can identify with that, whether they’re married or not. What if instead of just saying “life as a pastor is discouraging,” I said “right now my job is frustrating, and I think God is using that to help me see that I can’t control what

other people do, and have to trust that the Holy Spirit is ultimately the only one who can make my work *effective*? If I confess like that, then it invites people *into* conversation, instead of boxing them out. It's easier to see how the things I'm struggling with are also things that *other* people struggle with.

And yes, doing it that way requires a little more self-awareness. It takes a little more thought than just venting what's frustrating to me on any particular day. But it taps into what I have in *common* with others. Namely, that we are all followers of Jesus who are affected by the brokenness of the world, and are trying to learn what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection has to say about that. That's how we build community, even when there's a lack of chemistry. That's how we build community on the *cornerstone* that makes community *possible*. Second...

### **Look for bridges, not barriers.**

Second, there are going to be times when people you are in community with don't necessarily know *how* to do what we just talked about. They don't know how to confess what's *actually* going on beneath the surface. Whether it's because they're newer to following Jesus, or because they're just in a tough season where it's hard for them to see where God is in the midst of it, or whatever other reason. There will come moments where they don't know how to dig out the *heart* of what's going on in their life.

And in those moments, they may need your *help*. They might need you to meet them halfway. They may need *you* to help them see what God might be showing them, or teaching them, or exposing in them, even when *they can't*. And in those moments, it helps to look for bridges, not barriers. When a stay-at-home mom in your community is struggling with anger and impatience towards her kids, and *you're not* a stay-at-home parent, you might feel on the surface like you can't identify with her at all. You might immediately see a *barrier*: you might immediately think "well I can't identify with that at all." But that's a good opportunity to look for a *bridge* between you and her instead. Even though you might not have *kids*, you most likely *can* identify with what it looks like to be angry and impatient. And you can share what God has taught you about that, even if you haven't experienced the *exact same situation* that she has. When a college student in your LifeGroup is struggling because they're seeing all their friends go out and party on a regular basis and have a great time, if you're *not* a college student, that might feel like such a foreign experience to you. But chances are you *do* know what it feels like to resist what everyone else around you seems to be doing. Maybe for you it just happens to be

how you spend money or how you approach your sexuality. So engage with them from *that* perspective, on how you approach *that* in your life.

Do you see how this works? **When you see other people through the lens of the good news of Jesus, you can *find* things you have in common, even in the midst of differences.** You're able to find unity, even in diversity. While their age or season of life or background might be different from yours, if they follow Jesus and you follow Jesus, there's also plenty that is the *same*. And to build this community—this church family—on the “cornerstone” of Jesus looks like seeing others through that *lens*, and finding *community*, even when there isn't inherent *chemistry*. That's what it means for us to be a spiritual household—a *family*, built upon the reconciling work of Jesus.

And as we do that, here's at what Ephesians 2 says will happen. Let's round out our passage to close things out, back in v. 21-22:

*[21] ...in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In **him** you also are being **built together** into a **dwelling place for God** by the **Spirit**.*

This “building” we are building together—this church family that we are working towards—Paul says that it functions as a “holy temple.” A temple, in the language of the *Old Testament*, is where people would go to encounter *God*. Where they would go to see what he was truly like. But Paul says, here in the *New Testament*, that when we build a church family on the foundation of the good news of Jesus, we become the temple. We become the place where people can encounter God. We become the place where God dwells. If we want the people in Knoxville—and in our world—to see God, it starts with the good news of Jesus transforming us, and us letting him make us into a family. With Jesus as the cornerstone. That's what we're after together. Amen?

Let's pray.