

Keys to Family Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 33:12-14, Ruth 1:16-18, John 17:21-26, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:11-22, 5:21-6:9.*

Memory Text: “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (*John 17:21, NIV*).

The Week at a Glance: The Bible exalts Christ as the great Center who draws all disconnected relationships together in His body on the cross.

Life in the household of God should help us grow closer at home, for in both cases the same principles should be at work—principles of love, humility, selflessness, and concern for others.

All this doesn't come automatically. On the contrary, each of us must fight constantly against the sinful and selfish tendencies of our fallen natures.

Though in the body of Jesus Christ on the cross all humanity has been reconciled to God and to one another (*Eph. 2:13-16, Col. 1:21-23*), on a daily practical level we must appropriate for ourselves the grace of Christ, which alone can make this unity a living experience for all who seek it in faith. This must be a daily experience in our lives. Fortunately, through the grace of Christ, it can be. We, though, have to make the choice to be what the Lord wants us to be.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 25.*

Christ the Center

What illustration does Paul use to describe the new unity that exists between peoples in Christ? How has Christ made “one” out of “two”? *Eph. 2:11-22; see also Gal. 3:28.*

The Cross of Christ removes the barriers that separate people from one another. Walls separated worshipers in the Jewish temple, men from women and Jews from Gentiles. Describing the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, Paul used language that applies equally to other divisions between nations, people groups, social strata, and gender. “To create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace” (*Eph. 2:15, NEB*) is good news that helps couples to truly know “one-flesh” unity in marriage. Also, by faith in Christ, long-divided families can be reconciled.

It’s one thing to quote Bible texts about oneness in Christ; it’s wholly another actually to experience it. What practical changes does Christ bring to our lives that enable us to experience the oneness and unity we have been promised? *See, for instance, Rom. 6:4-7, 2 Cor. 5:17, Eph. 4:24-32.*

“Picture a large circle, from the edge of which are many lines all running to the center. The nearer these lines approach the center, the nearer they are to one another. . . .

“The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 179.

“Between father and son, husband and wife . . . stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), p. 86.

How close is your family, or church family, to the center of that circle? What else must come down in order for the relationships to be as they ought to be?

Key Text: *Psalm 133:1*

Teachers Aims:

1. To show that unity in relationships can come only through Christ.
2. To explain the importance of submission to the Lord and to one another in our relationships.
3. To show how unity can be maintained by a heart committed to Christ.

Lesson Outline:

I. Unity Through Christ (*John 17:20, 21*)

- A. Jesus removed the barriers of separation at the Cross.
- B. As we draw nearer to Christ, we draw nearer to one another.
- C. Experiencing the love of God brings about unity in relationships.

II. Unity by Godly Submission (*Eph. 5:21*)

- A. The Bible teaches us to look out for the needs of others.
- B. We express love by meeting the needs of one another.
- C. Submission to Christ brings about harmony in the home.

III. Unity by Choice (*1 Pet. 3:8, 9*)

- A. Family members must be committed to maintaining unity in the home.
- B. Disharmony in the past can be changed by a willing surrender of self to Christ.

Summary: Unity can only come through a connection with Christ. As we draw nearer to Him, we will draw closer to one another. Harmony can be found when individuals, with a willing, submissive heart, look out for the needs of others.

COMMENTARY

I. Introduction

This week's lesson looks at ways to draw family members together. When we seek to heal that which separates us, we can find the solutions by first seeking a relationship with God. His grace is what we need, first and foremost. His love will heal our woundedness. We (Don and Sue) are reminded of that truth by reading Amos 3:3, NIV, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" Walking together implies intentionality and purpose. In relational terms, agreement precedes walking together. We do not experience unity just because we share the path. We experience unity because we are in agreement, and that makes the journey much more meaningful. Going the same direction and sharing the same purpose calls for commitment to growth and to development of communication and of conflict resolution skills.

For married couples, unity means a mutual and an intentional commitment that is renewed each day *as long as you both shall*

Becoming One Through His Love

“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else” (*1 Thess. 3:12, NIV*).

Jesus prayed to His Father that His followers would “be one as we are one” (*John 17:22, NIV*). **Summarize what Jesus was saying here, focusing specifically on the role of love needed in order to achieve this oneness.**

Unity among His followers was on Jesus’ mind in this prayer. Experiencing *agape* love is essential to this unity. Agape is the Bible word for God’s love used in this prayer and in many other places in the New Testament. Such love is God’s very nature (*1 John 4:8*), and it identifies Jesus’ followers (*John 13:35*). God’s love is not natural to the sinful human heart. It comes into one’s life as Jesus dwells with the believer by His Spirit (*Rom. 5:5; 8:9, 11*).

“*Love each other as I have loved you*” (*John 15:12, NIV*). The disciple John, who wrote these words, was once not lovable but proud, power-hungry, critical, and hot tempered (*Mark 3:17; Luke 9:54, 55; see also Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p. 295*). Later in life he remembered how Jesus had kept on loving him in spite of these traits. Jesus’ love gradually changed John, enabling him to love others in Christian unity. “We love Him because He first loved us” (*1 John 4:19, NKJV*), he wrote, and “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (*vs. 11, NKJV*).

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Try placing your name where the word love appears. How well does it fit? Ask Jesus to bring these qualities of love into your life by His Spirit. What changes might the Spirit prompt you to make in order to reach this Christian ideal?

live. For engaged couples, unity is a commitment to growth through premarital counseling and through enrichment activities that strengthen attachment bonds and spiritual connections. Ask your class for other examples of educational and of enrichment experiences that would benefit engaged couples.

If a couple builds on a solid foundation, their commitment to unity will be a lifelong journey. “However carefully and wisely marriage may have been entered into, few couples are completely united when the marriage ceremony is performed. The real union of the two in wedlock is the work of the after years.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 359, 360.

II. Keys to Unity

A. Building on the right foundation is vital to unity. Remember the biblical story of two men who each built a house (*Matt. 7:24-27*). One of them built on sand. When the storms came, his house was washed away. Ask your class to discuss how couples who are planning marriage or who are already married might *build on sand*.

The story labels one of the men as *wise* and the other as *foolish*. Responsible and irresponsible, or mature and immature, are other labels that might apply. The wise man built his house on a rock. When the storms came, winds and waves buffeted the house. The storms of life do not discriminate between wise and foolish builders. It is the foundation that makes the difference.

Note also that another distinguishing characteristic of the wise builder was his effort to implement the teachings of Jesus. The foolish builder heard the same life-giving words but did not heed them. Knowledge alone does not change behavior. Scripture states that “even the demons believe and tremble” (*James 2:19*). If we are to seek unity as couples, as families, we must intentionally know and implement Jesus’ teachings one step at a time until they become habits, significant parts of who we are.

B. Another key to unity is never to allow anyone or anything to build a barrier between family members, between husband and wife. Fred was married to Arnold’s sister, and there was already tension between the two men before the incident that *broke the camel’s back*. This incident began with a *playful* gesture at a family gathering. It was only a little bit of water that Arnold directed at Fred. That little bit of water, however, led to angry words and hurt feelings. Sadly, reconciliation never occurred between the brothers-in-law or their families. Both men died without ever having forgiven each other. Jesus’ teachings are clear: We must seek forgiveness from Him and others; and in return, we must be generous in forgiving others (*Matt. 6:14, 15; Col. 3:13*). As Jesus is willing to forgive us, so we must be willing to forgive others.

C. A third key to unity is learning to love in ways that are meaningful to specific family members. Every family member has

Selfishness: Family Destroyer

“If pride and selfishness were laid aside, five minutes would remove most difficulties.”—Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 119.

As human beings, our natures have been corrupted by sin. And, perhaps, the greatest example of that corruption is the curse of selfishness. We seem to be born selfish; we can see this reality in small children, whose basic nature is want for themselves. “Me, me, me! . . .” By the time we reach adulthood, this trait can manifest itself in some pretty terrible ways, especially in the home.

Of course, Jesus came to change this (*Eph. 4:24*). His Word promises us that we, through Him, don’t have to be dominated by this destructive character trait. His whole life is a perfect example of what it means to live without selfishness; to the degree we emulate His life (*1 John 2:6*), we will overcome the tendency to live only for ourselves.

Look up the following texts. What do they tell us about living a life of selflessness?

Phil. 2:3-5

1 John 3:16-18

As Ellen White wrote above, if pride and selfishness were put aside, so many problems could be solved very quickly, long before they fester and brew and eventually turn into something nasty. All members of the family, especially the parents, must be purged (*Prov. 16:6*) of this sin at the foot of the Cross (the greatest example in all the universe of selflessness), even if that means constantly coming back to the Cross and kneeling in prayer, faith, tears, and submission.

How much time are you spending at the Cross fighting against whatever selfishness appears in your life? How does this verse (*Matt. 7:16*) help show you whether or not you have been spending enough time there?

individual needs and ways of receiving love. Learning what those needs and ways are, then filling them accordingly, shows each member that he or she is highly valued.

D. Yet another key vital to unity is sharing the fruit of the Spirit with one another. These are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (*Gal. 5:22, 23*). Possession of these fruits is evidence that we are walking “with the Spirit” (*Gal. 5:25, NIV*). Unity is nurtured and blessed by experiencing the fruit as we interact with one another. Paul adds to the

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *John 17:21-26, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, Ephesians 2:11-22, Philippians 2:3-5, 1 John 3:16-18*

- 1 One of the most fundamental concepts of Christianity is atonement, or reconciliation. According to Ephesians 2:11-22, how did Christ bring about reconciliation between God and us? Between us and one another? How is this reconciliation revealed in Christian families?
- 2 Many couples enter a marriage relationship not so much as givers but as takers. Where in the Bible is unselfishness specifically mentioned as an antidote for the heartaches caused by selfishness? What is the Bible’s supreme manifestation of unselfish love? In what ways can that same spirit be demonstrated in a family relationship?
- 3 Submission and respect cannot be demanded; they have to be earned. (*Read Eph. 5:21–6:9.*) How can husbands earn the respect of their wives? How can parents earn the respect of their children? How can children earn the respect of their parents? What is the motivating factor in all these relationships?
- 4 On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), rate the level of unity in your family. Then list the factors that fight against unity, as well as the factors that contribute to family unity. How can you build more unity into your family relationships? Mention at least five methods.
- 5 Ellen White wrote: “The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another.”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 179. Identify at least one story (preferably two) from the Gospels that reveals a characteristic about Christ that you most want to emulate in order to create unity in your family.

Submission

What counsel does Paul have regarding humility and service in relationships? *Eph. 5:21*. How do you think this attitude contributes to unity in the church? Why is it so important at home? *Eph. 5:22–6:9*.

The word *submit* (*Eph. 5:21*) means to place oneself humbly before another person on the basis of voluntary choice. This unique principle began with Christ (*Matt. 20:26-28; John 13:4, 5; Phil. 2:5-8*) and characterizes all those who are filled with His Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*). “Reverence for Christ” is what motivates people to submit in this way (*vs. 21, NIV*). Mutuality in self-giving was, and still is, a revolutionary Christian teaching about social relationships. It brings to life the spiritual reality that all are one in Christ; there are no exceptions.

A household principle. The proving ground of Christian submission is in the home. If this principle is effective there, it will make a dramatic difference in the church. Paul moves immediately from the introduction of the principle of submission to discuss its application in families.

Three pairs of relationships are addressed in Ephesians 5:22–6:9—the most common yet most unequal relationships in society. The intent is not to reinforce an existing social order but to show how the faith culture of Christ operates when there is a radically different voluntary submission of believers to one another.

Why do you think Paul consistently speaks first to those who are socially weaker in the culture—the wives, children, and slaves? Write the qualifying phrase attached to the submission of each of these.

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| <i>Eph. 5:22</i> | <i>Eph. 6:1</i> | <i>Eph. 6:5</i> |
| | | |

Those with greater social power—husbands, parents, masters—are always addressed second. Each receives a directive quite uncommon to the culture. These directives must have astonished the believers of the first century. They leveled the ground around the Cross and opened the way for true oneness to be experienced in relationships.

Galatians list the fruits of “goodness, righteousness and truth” (*Eph. 5:9, NIV*).

E. Next we have prayer and the study of Scripture. A family or couple who prays and studies Scripture together likely is to be united. A depth of intimacy will exist between them, an intimacy vitalized by a shared spiritual journey. Family worship becomes more meaningful in a home whose members desire and practice unity. Couples can build their relationship as they bring their individual and mutual burdens before the Lord.

F. The final key to unity we will discuss is grace. We are sinful in nature and in deed. Our best efforts to seek unity will, at times, be futile. Then we will need a special dose of grace to bridge the gap between our desires and our actions.

Witnessing

Tom and Nancy loved each other fervently. They married in the church, and both took an active part in its functions. Their zeal and dedication led to their appointment to influential offices in their local congregation. But after a few years of married life, Tom and Nancy’s love for each other began to wane. They noticed and commented on each other’s faults with increasing frequency. “If only people knew how cold and uncommunicative you are behind the scenes,” Nancy said to Tom, “you would never be asked to serve as an elder.” “If only people knew what a nag you are, they would hardly keep you as a leader in women’s ministries,” Tom retorted. Their love withered.

Then Nancy, tired of her bitterness and resentment, decided to relearn how to love Tom. She studied Christ’s life of forgiving love and His willing death at the hands of cruel and derisive blasphemers—the very people He came to save. Christ’s unfathomable love toward all sinners, including her, rekindled Nancy’s love for Tom. She felt an upwelling of desire to be a blessing to him, regardless of his response. Tom was moved. He gently sought to revive their devotional and prayer life together, which had dwindled to almost nothing. They both weaned themselves away from contention and became more affirming. In this emotional climate Tom and Nancy both had growing success in overcoming the traits that each had previously found so intolerable in the other.

Apply: What changes of attitude and behavior do you need to make in order to come into unity with family members and fellow believers?

Living the Love We Promise

Ultimately, family cohesion and unity rest on the commitment of family members, beginning with the commitment of the marital partners, to care for one another. Sadly, Bible history is strewn with examples of failed promises, broken trust, and lack of commitment where it should have been present. Scripture also has stirring examples of ordinary people who, with God's help, committed themselves to friends and families and kept their promises.

Look at the following families and their levels of commitment. How could commitment have been strengthened in some families? What encouraged the commitment shown in the others?

Parent-child commitment (*Gen. 33:12-14, Exod. 2:1-10*)

Sibling commitment (*Gen. 37:17-28*)

Family commitment (*Ruth 1:16-18; 2:11, 12, 20; 3:9-13; 4:10, 13*)

Marital commitment (*Hos. 1:2, 3, 6, 8; 3:1-3*)

When we commit ourselves to another person, as in marriage or in the decision to bear or adopt a child, there must be a willing surrender of ourselves in order to make a different choice in the future, a surrender of control over an important segment of our lives. Laws may restrain negative behavior, but marriage and family relationships need love within them to enable them to flourish.

What does Jesus' promise of commitment (*Heb. 13:5*) mean to you personally? What effect should His commitment to you have on your commitment to Him, to your spouse, to your children, and to fellow believers?

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: “All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them; red hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies; eyes were torn out; parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are the things a man had to be prepared for, if he took his stand with Christ.”—Barclay, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The Daily Study Bible*, revised edition, vol. 2, p. 112.

Thought Questions:

1 As in the times of Nero, many places thrive today in which Christianity brings disruption, trouble, and chaos to families instead of peace and unity. In such places, when one member of the family accepts Jesus, he or she can expect a life of turmoil ahead. The church family is his or her family and the church a place of refuge. In the last days, this scenario will be true in more and more places. How can the church be prepared to play this *family* role?

2 “In 1978, Thomas Hansen of Boulder, Colorado, sued his parents for \$350,000 on grounds of ‘malpractice of parenting.’ Mom and Dad had botched his upbringing so badly, he charged in his suit, that he would need years of costly psychiatric treatment.” —(author unknown (http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a_z/f/family.htm)). What are possible settings of Hansen’s childhood? What is the explanation when such things happen in a household where Jesus was the center? How can the church comfort parents whose children have *strayed* in spite of their being good parents?

Application Question:

As of July 2004, there were over 13 million Seventh-day Adventists worldwide. As in the time after Jesus’ ascension to heaven, the job of increasing the church-family fold and of maintaining unity belongs not only to the administrators but to the members, as well. What can you and your Sabbath School class do as commissioners of the gospel?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “A Sacred Circle,” *The Adventist Home*, pp. 177–180; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 236–238.

Unity—the first work. “The first work of Christians is to be united in the family. . . .

“The more closely the members of a family are united in their work in the home, the more uplifting and helpful will be the influence that father and mother and sons and daughters will exert outside the home.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 37.

The secret of family unity. “The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ.”—Page 179.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Talk about the forces in your own society that work against family unity. What practical solutions can you offer to a family that is struggling against these influences?
- ❷ Is there a family in your church right now that has come apart? If so, what can you do as a class to help each member in this crisis time?
- ❸ Discuss this whole question of submission. How is it to be understood in a Christian context? In what ways has the principle been abused?

Summary: The Bible exalts Christ as the great Center who draws all disconnected relationships together in His body on the cross. His love courts and wins sinners, reconciling them within a warm and caring fellowship that astounds the world and glorifies God.