

BaptistWay Bible Series for September 21: Cherish all in the family

September 8, 2008

• *Ephesians 2:11-22*

Last week, we examined the difference God makes. This week, we pick up where we left off. Obviously, that is true with the reference. However, it is also true with the theme. It is a kind of a “so what” that grows out of last week’s lesson.

The world calls us to exclude those different from us. We see it all around us in just about every area of life. One aspect of human nature always has been that it drives us to look with suspicion on those who differ from us. The differences may be physical: race, clothing, length of hair, clean-shaven vs. bewhiskered, old vs. young and so on. They may be less visible: religion, politics, sexual orientation, etc. It may be our way of justifying ourselves and the way we are.

In any case, what are some ways you see that we treat differently those who disagree or are at odds with us, or look or acts in ways we do not? Often, we create epithets. We call them names and pigeon-hole them as if we have them totally “figured out.” Sometimes, we simply choose to avoid or ignore them.

This was true in Paul’s day. We speak so often of “Judeo-Christian” values although we have forgotten how different the Jewish way of thinking and living was from that of the Greeks and many of the other gentiles of the New Testament era.

God's call and promise to Abraham was that Abraham's seed be a blessing to "all peoples on earth" (Genesis 12:3). God also commanded Israel to be "a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5). By the New Testament days, the Jews had become so focused on being "holy" in terms of being separate from the rest of the world, that they had little regard for Gentiles. Gentiles were considered unclean—even from birth!

Then, Gentiles lived, dressed and worshipped in ways that Jews considered impure. Gentiles ate food considered unclean by Jewish law. They were even cut off from the inner areas of the Jewish temple—lest that very special place be defiled.

Paul alludes to this situation in verse 11. He notes that before, the Gentile Christians of Ephesus were given an epithet by the Jews: "uncircumcised." More importantly, Paul continues in verse 12, they were without hope, cut off not only from the Jews, but also from the source of life. In Jesus, however, the Gentiles had been brought to the source of life. Now, they had hope (v. 13).

In Micah 4, we read of the day when even Gentiles ("the peoples" and "many nations"), will seek God's council and ways. Important it is to recall that Jesus, when cleansing the temple, referred to Isaiah 56:7 and reminded those around him that the temple was to be a "house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17). One wonders if, when Jesus said they had made the Temple "a den of robbers," Jesus meant that the worship of God had been stolen from the Gentiles.

Paul wrote that Jesus had "made the two (Jews and Gentiles) one" and had "destroyed the barrier" and the "wall of hostility" that had divided Jews and Gentiles (v. 14). According to verses 15-17, now the two were—through the work of Jesus—"one body" (the church) and both had "access to the father by one Spirit."

Now, rather than having temple places in which Jews could worship and Gentiles could not, they were “being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (v. 22). They are one. One body. One family.

Though human nature is to distrust the different, the Jesus nature is to cherish all. Remember that Jesus, in John 3:16, refers to God’s love for the world. Which person in the world and in all its history is excluded from that? It seems to reason that, if one is excluded, we all are. In specific terms, if John 3:16 does not apply to the most heinous person you can name, it does not pertain to me—or you. Yes, that is the extent of God’s love and grace. Amazing, isn’t it?

The world just does not share grace, nor true love, easily. However, throughout 1 John we read the command to “love one another.” Unfortunately, as individuals as well as in our churches, denomination and country, we too seldom tolerate well people who differ from us in thought or appearance. (In this political season, have you tried having a civil discussion with another Christian whose deeply-held political views differ from yours?) Much less do we cherish and value them as equals in Jesus.

Why? What will it take for us to understand that there are no second-class citizens in God’s kingdom? When will we stop treating some as second-class members of Jesus’ church? Why have we failed so badly in realizing the cooperative, peaceful unity God offers in Christ, and what can we do about it?

We can allow God to change us. The issue is not how “they” need to change. Let’s allow God to truly build all of us up together.

Questions to explore

- *What does 1 Corinthians 12-13 suggest about how we need to change so that we will truly cherish everyone in Jesus’ family?*

- What difference would those changes make in the ways you and your church would cherish everyone in God's family?