

## LESSON 2

# Barriers to Unity in the Church

Acts 13:13–52

*Therefore, let it be known to you, brothers and sisters, that through this man forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you. Everyone who believes is justified through him from everything that you could not be justified from through the law of Moses.*

Acts 13:38–39

**Class Overview:** In this lesson, we will examine the most common barriers that threaten unity within the body of Christ. While God has already created unity through Christ, Scripture makes clear that unity must be protected and kept. Drawing primarily from Ephesians 4 and supporting New Testament texts, this study identifies attitudes and behaviors—such as pride, selfishness, immaturity, and unresolved conflict—that quietly fracture the church from within. The goal of this lesson is not to assign blame, but to help believers recognize these dangers honestly and respond with humility, patience, and renewed commitment to one another.

### **Class Objectives:**

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Identify key attitudes and behaviors that undermine unity in the church.
2. Explain why unity is fragile in practice, even though it is secure in Christ.
3. Recognize how personal pride and immaturity contribute to conflict.
4. Understand the biblical call to patience, humility, and forbearance.

5. Evaluate personal habits and attitudes that may hinder unity in the body.

## Introduction

MOST CHURCHES DON'T LOSE UNITY ALL AT ONCE. It rarely happens because of a single dramatic event or an open rebellion. More often, unity erodes slowly, through unspoken frustrations, hardened attitudes, unresolved disagreements, and quiet withdrawal. On the surface, things may look peaceful, but underneath, connections weaken, and trust fades.

Scripture is realistic about this. God never pretends that unity is automatic simply because we share the same faith. That's why we are repeatedly urged to *protect* unity, not assume it. In this lesson, we're going to look honestly at the barriers that threaten unity, not so we can criticize the church, but so we can strengthen it. If we want to build up the body, we must be willing to confront what tears it down.

In Ephesians 4, things move quickly from celebrating unity to warning against the attitudes that destroy it. As we turn there, Paul becomes very personal and practical. These are not hypothetical dangers; they are everyday challenges faced by real congregations made up of real people, much like us.

## Unity Must Be Protected, Not Assumed (Ephesians 4:1–3)

Paul doesn't tiptoe into Ephesians 4. He comes straight at us: *walk worthy*. No warm-up. No easing in. Just live in a way that fits what God has done for you. What is said here is inspiring... and sobering. Because unity isn't just a doctrine we affirm. It's a life we practice. On Tuesdays. In meetings. In awkward conversations.

Here's the key: Paul doesn't tell the church to *create* unity. God already did that through Christ. Our job is to guard it. Protect it. Hold onto

it. That tells us something important. Unity is a gift—but gifts can be neglected. And once people get involved (which they always do), things get complicated. Unity is real, but it's not automatic. Left unattended, it thins out.

So, Paul names the traits that keep it alive: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. Not personality preferences. Not optional add-ons for the spiritually elite. This is the everyday practice of Christians who want the church to stay whole. Pride cracks relationships. A sharp tongue escalates things fast. Impatience runs out of grace in a hurry. And when we stop bearing with each other, division isn't far behind. Christlike character isn't sentimental: it's structural. It holds the body together.

In Philippians 2:3–4, Paul puts his finger on selfish ambition and conceit as unity-killers, and he lifts up humility as the cure. In Romans 14:19, he tells us to chase what builds peace and strengthens one another. Notice what he doesn't say: win every argument. Unity isn't preserved by proving you're right. It's maintained by choosing attitudes that strengthen relationships without abandoning truth.

And maintaining unity takes effort. The word itself implies work. Churches don't drift into deeper connection. They drift apart. Quietly. Slowly. A small offense ignored. A conversation avoided. Assumptions left unchallenged. And before long, there's distance where there used to be warmth. Unity requires vigilance. It requires sacrifice.

Paul anchors it all in peace. Not the fake kind where everyone just stays quiet. Real peace. Reconciled peace. The kind rooted in Christ that makes wholeness possible. It shows up when we listen before reacting. When we respond with grace instead of heat. When we care more about understanding than about scoring points. Unity isn't fragile because it's weak. It's precious because it matters. And if we want the body of Christ to grow strong—healthy, vibrant, useful to the Lord—we must protect that unity on purpose. Not casually. Not occasionally. But consistently.

## **Pride and Self-Interest as Barriers to Unity (Philippians 2:3–4; James 4:1–3)**

If we're honest, one of the biggest threats to unity isn't false doctrine or persecution. It's pride. The quiet kind. The respectable kind. The kind that dresses itself up as conviction. Paul goes straight at it in Philippians 2:3: *do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit*. That's strong language. And most of the time, selfish ambition doesn't look dramatic. It's subtle. It's the need to be right in the meeting. The frustration when your idea doesn't gain traction. The quiet thought: *Why don't they see this the way I do?* It's expecting others to adjust while rarely adjusting ourselves. That's how pride works. It turns unity inward. Instead of asking, "What helps the body?" we start asking, "What do I prefer?" or "Why isn't this going my way?" And once that shift happens, unity starts to thin out. The church becomes less about pursuing Christ together and more about competing priorities under the same roof.

James is blunt about this. In James 4:1–2, he traces conflict back to desires at war within us. Not just bad theology. Not just personality clashes. Desires. Wants that refuse to yield. And when *my wants* become non-negotiable, tension is guaranteed. Pride wants control. It wants recognition. It wants validation. And when it doesn't get those things, it doesn't respond quietly.

The tricky part? Pride rarely announces itself as pride. It tells us we're just "standing for truth." Or "protecting the church." And sometimes that's exactly what we're doing. But sometimes... we're defending preferences. Or protecting our own position. That's why Paul's call to humility matters so much. Humility doesn't mean abandoning conviction. It means holding it with a heart that can still listen and learn. Still seek understanding.

Romans 12:16 urges us not to be proud but to associate with the humble. Pride isolates. It narrows the circle. Humility opens it back up. Pride says, "My way." Humility says, "What strengthens the whole?" And here's what happens when pride goes unchecked: conversations grow tense. People get guarded. Trust erodes. Cooperation fades. It doesn't happen overnight. It seeps in. But when humility governs

the heart—when we’re more concerned with Christ’s honor than our own—something shifts. Disagreements are handled differently. Tension doesn’t automatically become division. The body grows stronger instead of splintering. Unity isn’t preserved by force of personality. It’s sustained by people who are willing to bend before they break each other.

## **Immaturity and Unresolved Conflict Weaken Unity (Ephesians 4:14–15; Hebrews 5:12–14; Matthew 18:15–17)**

Another real obstacle to unity? Spiritual immaturity. And Paul doesn’t dance around that either. In Ephesians 4:14, he warns about remaining spiritual children—unstable, easily swayed, reactive rather than discerning. This is not just a private issue between you and God. Immaturity spills into relationships. It shows up in how we handle tension. Or don’t.

When we’re immature, small disagreements seem huge. Minor misunderstandings last longer than they should. Emotions take control while wisdom stays in the background. Soon, something that could have been resolved in five minutes turns into five months of silence. Immaturity isn’t always dramatic. Sometimes it’s overreacting to a comment that wasn’t meant the way we heard it. Sometimes it’s refusing to really listen. Or treating personal preference like it carries the weight of biblical authority. The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who should’ve grown by now but are still living on milk rather than solid food (Hebrews 5:12–14). It doesn’t just mean knowing more verses. It means developing discernment through practice. Through use. Through experience. Without that, we simply don’t have the tools to handle conflict in Christlike ways.

And when conflict goes unresolved, things compound fast. Jesus gave us a clear path in Matthew 18:15–17. Go to the person. Deal with it directly. Protect both truth and relationship. But what do we often do instead? We avoid. Or we vent to someone else. Or we pretend it didn’t bother us—until it shows up sideways later. Silence isn’t peace.

Avoidance isn't reconciliation. It just delays the fracture. Paul offers a better way: speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). That's maturity. Not avoiding difficult conversations. Not using "truth" as an excuse to be harsh. Maturity balances both. Love influences how truth is shared. Truth keeps love from becoming sentimental or compromising. Remove either one, and unity begins to wobble.

The New Testament never treats maturity as merely intellectual. It's relational. It's seen in how we forgive. How we listen. How we address wrongs. How we pursue reconciliation even when it's uncomfortable. Churches don't just divide over major doctrinal battles. Sometimes they fracture because everyday conflicts are handled poorly by people who haven't learned to grow up in Christ.

Unity becomes stronger when we slow down our reactions and embrace reflection. When we pray before we respond. When we choose to engage instead of withdraw. In a mature church, conflict isn't automatically seen as a threat — it's viewed as an opportunity to grow. A healthy church isn't one without disagreements. It's one that has learned how to face them faithfully and emerge stronger on the other side.

## **Withdrawal, Apathy, and Passivity Erode Unity (Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Corinthians 12:25–26; Revelation 2:4–5)**

Not all threats to unity are loud or confrontational. Some of the most damaging barriers develop quietly, as members slowly withdraw from meaningful engagement with the body. This withdrawal may come from discouragement, busyness, unresolved hurt, or fatigue, but regardless of the cause, the effect is the same: the body weakens when its members disengage.

Hebrews 10:24–25 urges us not to neglect gathering together but to actively encourage one another. Unity requires closeness and involvement. When we pull back, physically, emotionally, or spiritually, connections loosen, encouragement diminishes, and isolation begins to take hold.

Paul's body imagery reminds us that withdrawal is never neutral. In 1 Corinthians 12:25–26, he explains that God made the body so that its members would have the same care for one another. When one member suffers, all suffer; when one rejoices, all rejoice. Withdrawal disrupts this shared life. When members are absent or disengaged, both their needs and their gifts are removed from the body's life.

Apathy can be just as damaging as open conflict. In Revelation 2:4–5, Jesus rebukes the church in Ephesus not for false teaching, but for losing their first love. Activity continued, but affection and engagement had cooled. Churches can remain busy while becoming relationally disconnected. Unity weakens when love grows cold, and participation becomes routine rather than relational.

Passivity often disguises itself as humility or peacekeeping. Some withdraw to avoid tension or responsibility, assuming others will carry the load. But the Spirit's vision of the body leaves no room for spectators. Unity is not kept by silence or distance, but by involvement. Healthy unity depends on engaged hearts. When we remain present, invested, and responsive to one another, the body stays strong. When withdrawal becomes normal, unity fades quietly, but steadily. The call of Scripture is clear: unity is sustained not only by avoiding harm, but by actively building one another up in love.

## **For Application**

Unity doesn't sustain itself on autopilot. It never has. Yes, God created our unity in Christ, and that part is His work. But maintaining it? That's our responsibility. It takes effort—real effort—humility, patience, and love that refuses to give up. The moment we assume unity will just take care of itself, it starts to drift. Each of us has a part in this church's spiritual health. Not just the elders. Not just the loud voices. All of us.

And if we're honest, most unity issues don't appear overnight. They slowly weaken. Quietly. A preference here. A wounded ego there. A decision I dislike. Pride doesn't usually reveal itself. It simply takes hold. Humility isn't pretending you don't care. It's not backing down from your beliefs. It's choosing the good of the group over winning an

argument. It's listening—truly listening—even when you believe you're right.

Maturity matters more than we realize. Immaturity can turn small issues into long-lasting problems. We've seen this happen. Growing in Christ involves learning to handle tension calmly, to speak truth gently without using it as a weapon, and to seek reconciliation instead of holding onto resentment. None of this happens by accident. It's learned and practiced.

And here's something we don't say enough: pulling back doesn't protect unity. Withdrawal doesn't improve things. When people step away—emotionally, relationally, or spiritually—the body weakens. Unity is built through presence. By showing up. By staying engaged even when it feels awkward or costly. Especially then. At the end of the day, it's easier to diagnose the church than to examine our own hearts. We can all point out what's wrong, but building up the body starts closer to home. It begins with asking myself, "Am I helping or hurting? Am I strengthening this church, or adding weight to it?" Unity grows when we take that question seriously—and when we decide, personally, to live in a way that makes this body stronger.

## **Memory Verse and Weekly Challenge**

### **Memory Verse:**

*Making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*  
— Ephesians 4:3

### **Weekly Challenge:**

This week, examine your own attitudes and responses within the body of Christ. Ask yourself where pride, impatience, withdrawal, or unresolved tension may be affecting your relationships. Take one concrete step toward unity—initiate a conversation, extend forgiveness, offer encouragement, or re-engage where you have pulled back. Pray specifically for humility and peace, and be ready to share next week one way you sought to protect the unity of the body.

## For Reflection

1. Why do you think Paul emphasizes the need to *maintain* unity rather than assuming it will naturally exist among members of the local church?

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2. In what subtle ways can pride or self-interest show up in church life without being immediately recognized as pride?

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3. How does spiritual immaturity affect the way disagreements and conflicts are handled within the church?

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4. Why are withdrawal and passivity often more damaging to unity than open disagreement or conflict?

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5. What is one practical step you can take to help protect and strengthen unity in the body this week?

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