

Lesson 3

Spiritual Family

Loyalty to Christ, each other, and the local church's mission

Before You Begin

Read Ephesians 2:12-19; 4:1-6.

Pray for those in your local congregation, including the elders and other spiritual leaders. Pick out a few members who may be hurting, struggling spiritually, or needing to become more connected to the local body and pray for them specifically.

Set Your Intentions: Ask yourself what you hope to achieve from this lesson.

Journal Your Thoughts. Journaling can be a valuable tool for spiritual reflection and growth.

Introduction

When a child is adopted into a new family, they often go from tragic circumstances and family dysfunction into a new situation of stability. In their old situation, they may have been orphaned, neglected, or abused. Now, they often find stability, peace, and love in their new home. Their parents have committed to caring for, protecting, and nurturing that child as it grows into adulthood. On top of that, that child gets *a family*. Maybe it's brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends. It's a beautiful thing.

Spiritually, when God adopts us, we go from total separation (foreigners and strangers) to the household of God. I love the imagery in Ephesians 2 where Paul says the Gentiles weren't just invited to God's house; they got a seat at God's table (2:12-19). Through the work of Christ, God is bringing people together from every tribe, every nation, every language, and every culture and making them one. Paul likens this to a building being put together and growing *into a holy temple in the Lord. In him, you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit* (2:21-22). Your coming into the body of Christ is not just about you – it is Christ and the new family of fellow believers you receive.

Today, our world often emphasizes individual spirituality and the pursuit of personal faith. Because of this, the essential nature of the local church within the Christian life cannot be overstated. The New Testament presents a clear picture: when a person comes to Christ, he or she receives a new spiritual family: the church. The notion of experiencing salvation outside the context of a local church community is entirely foreign to the New Testament. Our Lord Jesus Christ, throughout His teachings and through the establishment of His church, assumed that believers would not live their faith in isolation but within a family of like precious faith.

Paul's letters to the early churches emphasize this concept. In his greetings to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, Paul addresses individuals *and* a collective body of believers, sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints together. Similar greetings can be found in his letters to other churches, such

as those in Galatia and Corinth again (Galatians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1). These passages highlight the early church's nature as a local body of worshiping saints, highlighting the Lord's design for His followers to belong to individual congregations.

Ephesians 1:22-23 and Ephesians 5 reveal Christ's relationship with the church. He is its head, and it is His bride, the object of His supreme love and affection. Paul writes:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word (Ephesians 5:25-26).

Acts 20:28 reminds us of the immense value Jesus places on the church, having shed His blood for it. Our Lord's deep love and commitment should inspire us to value and commit to our local congregation deeply and personally.

Why is being a part of a spiritual family so important?

A Matter of Obedience

First and foremost, it comes down to obedience: The New Testament indicates that believers were baptized and gathered into local churches, often with their names recorded. In 1 Peter 5:1-2, local church members are identified as the flock. The shepherds of each church knew who each member was. This was not a casual affiliation but a committed identification with a local church body. History tells us when they moved from one place to another, and a letter often accompanied them so that a transfer might happen to another local assembly. Examples of this practice include Apollos in Acts 18:27 and Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2, demonstrating the early church's orderly and committed nature¹. There was never an assumption that a Christian would be floating around alone. The Biblical pattern points to a fundamental unity of saved souls.

A Matter of Fellowship

The New Testament's emphasis on fellowship shows believers' shared spiritual life and common faith:

God is faithful; you were called by him into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:9).

What we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

This fellowship was not superficial. Instead, it was a deep, participatory sharing in the life and mission of the church. Mutual care, worship, and encouragement, as detailed in Hebrews 10:22–25, exemplify the vital role of collective gatherings in nurturing the Christian's faith and love.

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering since he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

A Matter of Identity

Each church member is united with Christ (Galatians 2:20) and thereby with each other in an incredible spiritual family. In this, we see a collective belonging to the body of Christ, of which we are all integral parts (Ephesians 4:1–6). Our shared identity in Christ forms the foundation of our unity and mutual commitment.

In the opening verses of Ephesians 4, Paul shows us what this looks like in the life of the local congregation:

- 4:1 – Every member is dedicated to being who they’ve been called to be in Christ. This is what it means to walk worthy.
- 4:2 – Every member adopts the attitudes of *humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love*. These attitudes are like the glue that holds us all together.
- 4:3—Every member makes it the highest priority to maintain the unity the Spirit provides by striving for peace. It is no longer about our self-interests but about what is good for the body.
- 4:4-6 – These are the things upon which all Christians are to agree. They serve as things we rally behind as Christians as they make up the core of Christian doctrine.

As a Matter of Loyalty

The church is depicted as a family, a community where loyalty and mutual support are paramount (Ephesians 2:19). In a world where individual interests often prevail, the New Testament calls us to a loyalty that prioritizes the well-being of our spiritual brothers and sisters and the collective mission of the local church.

What’s In This for Us?

Commit to a Local Church. We need to see the importance of being part of a local church. We’re not talking about casual affiliation but a committed identification with a loving group of people where you can be nurtured, grow, and also contribute to the growth of others. Just as a child adopted into a new family finds stability and love, being part of a church family provides spiritual stability, love, and a sense of belonging. It’s a place to exercise obedience and fellowship, find identity, and express loyalty within the Body of Christ.

Engage in Deep, Meaningful Fellowship. The New Testament highlights the depth of fellowship within the church—a sharing of life and mission. This involves more than just attending services; it’s about engaging in mutual care, encouragement, and worship. It’s participating in a shared spiritual life, provoking one another to love and good works, and supporting each other’s faith and mutual growth, especially as we anticipate Christ’s return.

Embrace Your Identity in Christ. Recognize that your adoption into God’s family redefines your identity. You’re called to live this out in unity and peace with fellow believers, contributing to the church’s mission. This involves adopting attitudes of humility, gentleness, patience, and love, strengthening the bonds within the local church.

Prioritize Unity and Peace. Paul urges every church member to prioritize maintaining unity and peace. This unity is not based on our efforts but on the Spirit's work within us. It requires setting aside personal interests for the greater good. As part of a local congregation, your loyalty is to Christ, each other, and the local church's mission. This is how we reflect Christ's love and commitment to the world.

Conclusion

The local church is where obedience, fellowship, identity, and loyalty converge, creating a dynamic environment for spiritual growth. By recognizing the value of our spiritual family, we embrace the fullness of the Christian life, grounded in God's love and purpose as revealed in His Word.

For Discussion

1. How does the practice of adoption into a new family help us understand our relationship with God and the church?
2. How does being part of a local church challenge the modern emphasis on individual spirituality?
3. Discuss the importance of fellowship in the church. How does it go beyond being in the same space to sharing each other's lives and missions?
4. What role does obedience play in our participation in the local church, and why is it considered a matter of obedience to be part of a church community?
5. How does the New Testament's depiction of the church as a body of believers challenge our contemporary understanding of church membership and attendance?
6. In what practical ways can church members build the attitudes of humility, gentleness, patience, and love that Paul describes in Ephesians 4?

7. How does our identity in Christ influence our interactions and unity within the local church?

8. Discuss the concept of loyalty within the church. How does prioritizing the well-being of our spiritual brothers and sisters and the church's mission reflect the teachings of the New Testament?

9. Reflect on the statement, "The church is not an optional add-on to our life but is the very context in which our faith is lived out, nurtured, and brought to fulfillment." How does this perspective challenge or affirm your current involvement and commitment to your local church?

¹ See the example of Mark in Colossians 4:10.