

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?

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?

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

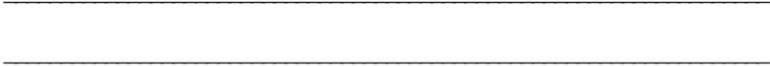
1 John 3:16-18

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?

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.

<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.

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?

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:

- 1 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?
- 2 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?
- 3 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.

One Bullet for Porras, Part 2

by ANTONIO SENDING, JR.

Porras watched his dreams for the future crumble as his father accepted a proposal for him to marry a girl from a neighboring village. The marriage would ease tensions between the villages and prevent future bloodshed, but Porras wanted to study and become a teacher. To disobey his father could well mean his death, but to obey meant the death of his dream. Frustrated and confused, Porras asked his student-missionary teachers what to do. They could only pray for him and urge him to pray for God's will to be done.

God answered Porras's prayers, and no wedding was held. A gift of another horse averted the possibility of war between the villages.

When it was time for us to return to Mountain View College to give our monthly report, we asked the chief to allow Porras to go with us. We planned to spend several days working on the new Adventist high school for Manobo youth. To everyone's surprise the chief agreed to let Porras go. "I want Porras out from this village," he said. "If anyone else asks him to marry, surely there will be bloodshed."

But Porras's mother could not be convinced to allow her son to leave. "No!" she wailed. "I will die if my boy goes! I will never see him again."

"If you did not want him to go to the new high school, you should have given him in marriage!" the chief roared.

Finally Porras was allowed to go. The villagers gathered for a last farewell. Porras comforted his crying mother as his father spoke. Holding his rifle, he announced, "Today marks the day when my boy will leave this village for the first time. He is the first one to go from this village to attend the Adventist high school. When he finishes there, he will go to Mountain View College to study. And, if it is God's will, he will return to us and be our teacher. I will miss my boy. I don't want him to come home until he is done with school, because if he does, someone will trap him into marriage. Now, I will shoot one bullet for Porras, to drive away any evil spirits that would keep him from following his dreams."

BANG!

Everyone hugged Porras goodbye. His mother cried as we walked down the path toward his future. Through tear-filled eyes his father watched us go. They wait eagerly for the day when he will return, educated and able to lead his people out of spiritual darkness into God's light.

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