

The Minister's Last Words

2 Corinthians 13:11–14

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Introduction

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of 2 Corinthians. We come this morning to Paul's final words in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. And what a letter it has been! The Apostle Paul has poured out his heart before the believers in Corinth—men and women whose conversion to Christ he witnessed as he brought the Gospel to the Achaean peninsula in southern Greece just a few years earlier; men and women whom he called his “beloved children” and he their father in the Gospel (1 Cor 4:14–15); a congregation that was beset with problems and difficulties from its very inception: from factionalism to gross immorality, from misunderstandings of Christian liberty to abuse of spiritual gifts; a congregation that brought Paul unparalleled joy at the same time as unequalled grief and pain; a church whose very existence in the epicenter of Greco-Roman paganism testified to the power of the Gospel; and yet a church that was hoodwinked by false teachers peddling a mix of Judaizing legalism and fleshly triumphalism, and openly attacking the ministry and the character of the Apostle Paul.

When Timothy delivered Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he learned that false teachers from Jerusalem had invaded the Corinthian church, and they were inciting a rebellion against Paul's apostleship and Paul's Gospel. Paul thought that by making an ahead-of-schedule visit to Corinth he could address this mutiny in person, clarify misunderstandings, and move forward. But when he got there, an influential man in the church sided with the false apostles and openly maligned Paul before the entire congregation. And instead of defending Paul's character and the Gospel he preached to them, the Corinthians allowed this man's factiousness and the false apostles' influence to go unchecked.

After this sorrowful visit, Paul wrote the Corinthians a severe letter, sternly rebuking them for failing to properly deal with sin in the church, and for straying from his apostolic teaching and message. He sent Titus to bring the letter to Corinth, and then arranged to meet Titus to hear how the Corinthians responded. And we hear about that report in chapter 7, where we learn that God had sovereignly worked through Paul's severe letter, so that the majority of the Corinthians repented of their sin and reaffirmed their love and loyalty to Paul.

And so Paul writes Second Corinthians to decisively refute the accusations of the false teachers, to fully vindicate of his apostolic ministry and message, and to encourage the Corinthians to remain faithful to the Gospel. And so he begins in that opening section of chapter 1 explaining that his many sufferings in ministry don't discredit his apostolic genuineness, but instead

authenticate his ministry, because his many afflictions are the occasion for his experience of God's overwhelming comfort. Divine strength displayed in human weakness—divine glory magnified in human shame—is a key theme throughout the letter. In the second half of chapter 1, he assures the Corinthians of his integrity in his dealings with them, including his decision to change plans and visit the Corinthians ahead of schedule—a decision he made out of love and concern for *them*.

From chapter 2 verse 14 all the way through to chapter 7 verse 4, he launches into an extended definition and defense of New Covenant Gospel ministry. He speaks of being a soldier in Christ's army, always led in triumph over sin and Satan despite persecution and discouragement (2:14). He speaks of being an aroma of death to death and an aroma of life to life—how the proclamation of the very same Gospel results in the salvation of some and the hardening of others, all according to God's sovereign election (2:16). In chapter 3, he speaks of the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old—how the ministry of death in letters engraved on stones was glorious, but how the ministry of righteousness by the Spirit of God is far more glorious (3:7–11). The glory of the Law revealed in the face of Moses is no match for the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ, which the New Covenant believer beholds with unveiled face, and by that sight is transformed into Christlikeness (3:18; 4:4, 6).

In the opening verses of chapter 4, Paul once again proclaims his ministerial integrity against the accusations of the false apostles (4:1–2). And even if the Gospel he preaches doesn't draw huge crowds, those whom God has chosen from before the foundation of the world do, by grace, have their eyes opened to the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ (4:3–6). In chapter 4 verse 7 he explains that the treasure of the Gospel message is housed in earthen vessels, and so faithful servants of Christ should expect to suffer. The only glorious thing about Gospel ministry is the message preached, not the lives of the preachers. And so the faithful minister endures suffering in ministry, by trusting in the resurrection power of God, remembering that momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (4:17).

In the first half of chapter 5, Paul speaks about that resurrection hope—that the worst the enemies of the Gospel can do is kill us, and they do nothing but chase us right up to heaven. And so we can be free to lay our lives down for the Gospel *now* (5:1–13). And then in 5:14–21, Paul tells of how the glory of the Gospel itself so brilliantly displays the love of Christ that compels him to sacrificial ministry, climaxing in that great statement in verse 21: He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And he urges the Corinthians to put all their trust in *that* Gospel—to not neglect the day of salvation that has come upon them in this New Covenant era by going back to the shadows of Mosaic ceremonialism (6:1–2). Instead, chapter 6 verse 14 through to chapter 7 verse 1, they are to cut themselves off from any fellowship with false teachers, who are nothing but unbelievers—idols in the temple of God. And so in 6:11–13 and then again 7:2–4, he pleads with them to

“Make room for us in your hearts”—to open wide to him just as his heart is opened wide to them.

Then, in chapter 7 verses 5 to 16, Paul records Titus’s report of the repentance of the majority of the congregation. We learn there that the majority of the church had been shaken from their stupor and had been restored to faithfulness. And Paul speaks much of his great joy for this reconciliation. And so, since the severe letter did its job, as Paul turns to chapters 8 and 9 he’s able to discuss the offering he’s been administrating for the poor saints in the church of Jerusalem. The Corinthians had begun this collection about a year prior, before everything was stalled by the conflicts surrounding the false apostles, and now Paul writes to exhort them to bring that effort to completion (8:10–11). And that is because, he also informs them, he’s going to be sending Titus and two other brothers back to Corinth ahead of him, to ensure that everything is prepared for when he comes (8:16–24).

And then, in chapters 10 to 13, Paul sets his sights on the false apostles themselves—as well as on an obstinate, unrepentant minority of the church that still lie under the spell of these heretical impostors. He addresses his opponents head-on, exposing them as servants of Satan who masquerade as apostles of Christ (11:13–15). And Paul also forcefully rebukes the unrepentant minority for failing to make a clean break from these false teachers. Some of the most caustic irony that you see anywhere in Scripture comes in the so-called “Fool’s Speech,” in chapter 11 verse 16 to chapter 12 verse 10, where Paul dons the mask of a boastful fool to show the Corinthians how foolish they’ve been for becoming infatuated with fleshly boasting.

But from the middle of chapter 12 through to the end of the letter, Paul acts once again as a spiritual father to his wayward children. He assures them of his love for them, his willingness to spend and be spent for their souls. He warns them that when he comes to them this third time, he doesn’t want to find them out of sorts. He says in chapter 13 verse 2, “I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone.” If there is no repentance, he *will* exercise apostolic authority and remove them from the church. And so he calls for them to examine themselves to see whether they’re genuinely in the faith, but he expresses hope that they’ll pass the test and come to realize that he is the Lord’s chosen servant for their spiritual growth and well-being.

And so that brings him to his final remarks—the last words he wants ringing in the ears of the Corinthians after laboring through this magnificent letter as they anticipate his imminent return. And those last words comprise our text for this morning. So follow along as I read 2 Corinthians 13, verses 11 to 14: “Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

The final words of any communication are significant; how much more a letter so important as 2 Corinthians—a letter so full of Paul’s heart, that so transparently expresses his deep affection for his spiritual children, people who occupy so special a place in his heart! And these last words are not only full of significance for the Corinthians, but they are full of instruction for us as well, reflecting as they do Paul’s pastoral concerns and priorities for his precious congregation as they approach a significant watershed moment in their lives. And as we seek to benefit from this magnificent letter right down to the final greetings, we’ll group these final remarks into **three components** as we examine them together. First, we have **optimistic exhortations**; second, there are **affectionate greetings**; and third, **trinitarian blessings**.

I. Optimistic Exhortations (v. 11)

Well, let’s consider **first**, then, these **optimistic exhortations**. We see them in verse 11. Paul writes, “Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

And right away you notice the marked change in tone. He has issued his warnings to the unrepentant minority, but he doesn’t want to end on a note of sharpness. He doesn’t want the final words of his letter to leave them in a state of exasperation. He wants to comfort them, seasoning his sharp reproofs as it were with honey, so that they might be received well—so that the Corinthians might actually benefit from his correction. And so now he turns to address the members of the Corinthian congregation as a whole, and he does so with affectionate **optimism**: “Finally, *brethren*.” They are brothers and sisters. They are members of the same family of God, adopted sons and daughters through the Gospel—members of the one body of Christ. You say, “Wait a minute. Didn’t he just call them to examine themselves precisely because some of them may *not* be genuine brethren?” Yes, but here he expresses his optimism—his hope in God’s grace that those who need to repent *will* do so, and will be recognized once again to be genuine brothers and sisters in Christ.

And after this optimistic and affectionate address come five imperatives—five rapid-fire, staccato **exhortations** that sum up his concerns for these dear people. And they could serve well as a general summary of the values that ought to mark any healthy church. Paul exhorts them to joy, to maturity, to wisdom, to unity, and to peace.

A. Joy

First, he exhorts them to joy. “Finally, brethren, rejoice.” And in one sense, it is no surprise that that Paul calls them to rejoice. After all, rejoicing characterizes the Christian life; joy is the centerpiece of all Christian experience. It is at the top of the list of virtues which the Spirit produces in the life of the believer, Galatians 5:22: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, [and] joy.” In Romans 14:17, Paul says that the kingdom of God itself *is* “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Joy is the very heritage of the Lord Jesus, who told His disciples that the goal of His teaching was their genuine joy, John 15:11: “These things I have spoken to you that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” The Psalmists command us to sing for joy in the Lord (Ps 33:1), to delight ourselves in the Lord (Ps 37:4), and to be glad in the Lord (Ps 97:12). Philip Hughes wrote that joy “should be a foremost mark of every Christian community” (486). Another commentator said that joy is “the distinctive mark of the believer in Christ Jesus” (Fee, *Presence*, 404). And perhaps the Puritan Richard Baxter said it best when he said, “Delighting in God, and in his word and ways, is the flower and life of true religion” (*The Cure of Melancholy*, 257).

And so really, when Paul calls them to rejoice, he’s calling them to nothing less than to be genuine Christians! Because joy *is* the flower and life of true religion. And why is that? It’s because as Christians, we have so much to be joyful about! We are guilty criminals, violators of the law of God, rightly sentenced to eternal punishment, cut off from God, to be objects only of His wrath. And yet because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we who deserve to be cut off from God instead have *access* to our loving Father (Eph 2:18). We are united to Christ by covenant. We are forgiven of all our sins, credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, and assured of eternal life, free from sin, forever in the Lord’s presence. We should be in hell *right now*! And yet here we sit, in the house of the Lord, in the fellowship of the redeemed, singing praises to Christ, enjoying every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ! Rejoicing ought to be like breathing for the Christian! Rejoicing ought to be the Christian’s mother tongue—the dialect of the redeemed! Infinite blessings such as we enjoy cannot be received with indifference. They must be treasured in gladness.

And Paul’s embrace of the centrality of joy in the Christian life is evident even in this letter. In chapter 6 verse 10, he describes himself as a minister of the Gospel as one who is “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” In chapter 7 verse 4 he says he is “overflowing with joy [even] in [the midst of] all our affliction.” In chapter 2 verse 3, he says the Corinthians are those who ought to make him rejoice, hoping that his joy would be their joy. And in chapter 1 verse 24, he characterizes his entire ministry to the Corinthians as being a *sunergos*—a colaborer—for *their joy*. Everything he did was to deepen their joy in Jesus! Even his sarcastic mockery of their sin and his severe warnings of discipline!

There may have been not a few Corinthians who heard, “Finally, brethren, rejoice,” and thought, “Are you kidding me? Are you being serious right now? After what you just put us through?”

You've mocked us, basically called us fools, told us to examine whether we're even Christians, and have threatened us with church discipline! And we're supposed to rejoice?!" And Paul would say, "Yes! *Everything* I say, everything I write, everything I do is a labor to increase your joy in Christ! And since you've allowed your joy in Christ to be displaced by joy in sin, and in fleshliness, and in false doctrine, my rebukes and calls for repentance are nothing less than hope-filled entreaties for you to forsake the broken cisterns of the false pleasures of the world, which can never truly satisfy you, and to come feast the appetites of your soul on the fullness of joy to be had in Jesus, the great fountain of living water (Jer 2:13). So yes, brethren, rejoice. Stop seeking your joy in sin and error! Return and *rejoice* in the Lord Jesus Christ!"

B. Maturity

Second, he calls them to "be made complete." And we saw this verb back in verse 9, where he tells the Corinthians he prays that they would be made complete. And what he prays for them in verse 9 he exhorts them to in verse 11. This is the word *katartizō*, which has the basic meaning of "to put in order," or "to restore." In Matthew 4:21 the term is used of fishermen mending their nets. In medical contexts, the word referred to the setting of a broken bone. Paul uses the term in Galatians 6:1 when he says, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, *restore* such a one in a spirit of gentleness." And so it has this idea of restoration, of putting back into place, of repairing what was broken and restoring what was lost.

He's calling them to mend their ways, to be restored to harmony and wholeness—both in their relationship to God and in their relationship to one another in the church. He exhorts them to press for a level of spiritual maturity that manifests in the rejection of false doctrine, in repentance from immorality and walking in holiness, and in the embrace of the genuine church of Christ and the true Gospel. "Do whatever you have to do to come to a place of harmonious restoration into the truth!"

C. Wisdom

Third, in addition to joy and to maturity, he calls them to wisdom. Now, the NAS translates the next word as, "Be comforted." But I don't quite think that's the best rendering based on the context. The word is *parakaleísthe*, from *parakaleō*, which, depending on the context, can speak of both encouragement and comfort on the one hand and exhortation and admonition on the other. It's somewhat similar to the English word "encourage." I can "encourage" you by comforting and reassuring you that you're doing a good job. Or I can "encourage" you, for example, to be quick to listen and slow to speak. "Encourage" can mean to comfort and reassure, in some contexts, and it can mean to urge and exhort, in others. The Greek word *parakaleō* is similar to that. And so, though the New American Standard opts for "comforted," I think the overall context of correction and calls for restoration to genuine Christian experience makes it

better translated, “be exhorted.” That is to say, “Receive my exhortations. Heed my appeals. Accept my admonitions.”

And what are those admonitions that he’s calling them to heed? Well, they’re the exhortations he’s given throughout the letter: to be reconciled to God and not receive the grace of God in vain (5:20, 6:1); to open their hearts to him and repudiate all partnership with the false apostles who aren’t genuine believers in Christ (6:13; 6:14–7:1); to abound in the gracious work of the offering for the Jerusalem church, and to warmly receive the men he’s sending to collect it (8:7, 24); to have done with the fleshly triumphalism of the false apostles (10:1–12:10); and to examine themselves to ensure that they really do belong to Christ (13:5). And here at the conclusion of his letter, he’s calling them to obey all of these injunctions that he’s urged them to.

And I call this an exhortation to *wisdom* because wisdom receives correction from qualified spiritual leaders, whereas folly rejects that correction. This point is made over and over again in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs 10:17 says, “He is on the path of life who heeds instruction, But he who ignores reproof goes astray.” Proverbs 12:1: “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.” Proverbs 15:31–32: “He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. He who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding.” Wise people receive correction and admonition. They submit themselves to biblical authority. Those who stiffen their neck against correction and rebel against divinely instituted authority, according to the Proverbs, are stupid, despise themselves, and go astray. If the Corinthians are going to be a healthy church, if they’re going to experience divine blessing, they must exhibit enough wisdom to heed correction.

D. Unity

Next comes an exhortation to unity. Paul calls the Corinthians to “be like-minded.” Literally, the phrase means “think the same thing.” One of the commentators says it means “to share an identical outlook and common action” (Harris, 933). This is a call to common conviction. It’s a call to doctrinal unity. “Be of the same mind.” “Think the same thing.”

Notice what Paul does not say. He does not say, “Guys, I recognize that there are some divisions going on in the church. Some of you have this perspective and others of you have another perspective. Who’s to say your perspective is more valid than their perspective? Doctrine is divisive. Unity is more important than doctrinal debate. You just need to agree to disagree.” Paul does not call the Corinthians to agree to disagree! Because agreeing to disagree is not unity! Agreeing to disagree is simply being comfortable with your disunity! No: “Be of the same mind.” Instead of agreeing to disagree, agree to *argue* with one another. Agree to patiently work through the issues together until one side actually refutes the other, and, through iron sharpening

iron, you actually come to a common understanding of the truth. Biblical truth is too important to just ignore your differences. Work *through* your differences.

This is a priority for all of Christ's churches. In Romans chapter 15, verses 5 and 6, Paul said this to the church of Rome: "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to *be of the same mind* with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that *with one accord* you may *with one voice* glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." You see? God is glorified not when we agree to disagree or set our doctrinal differences aside. He's glorified when His church can praise Him with one voice according to the same mind. In Philippians chapter 1, verse 27, Paul tells the church of Philippi that he wants to see them "standing firm in *one spirit*, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." In chapter 2 verse 2 he says, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind." And then to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:10: "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment." The premium that Paul puts on a substantive unity of mind in the church simply cannot be overstated.

Now, of course, this doesn't mean that every Christian has to have the same opinion on absolutely everything. There *are* matters of indifference in the Christian life—issues that aren't a matter of black-and-white biblical truth but are matters of conscience. Paul talks about those kinds of issues in Romans 14, and some again in 1 Corinthians 8–10. But that's not what the Corinthians were dealing with. They were divided on doctrinal issues—the nature and entailments of the Gospel, the doctrines of Christ and salvation, matters of biblical authority. And it is an unfaithful, sickly church that prizes a substanceless, paper "unity" at the expense of robust doctrinal oneness. A thriving, healthy church is not impatient with conflict over matters of doctrine; they work through those issues until they are convinced by the Scriptures and come to be of the same mind.

E. Peace

And when that happens—when the members of a church make it a priority to come to common convictions through a disciplined study of the Scriptures—there will be peace. And that's Paul's fifth exhortation in verse 11: "live in peace." By God's grace, labor to get yourselves into a state in which you're thinking the same thing about essential biblical truth, and when you have common convictions about the most important matters in life you will find that there will be peace. No more bickering, no more jealousy, no more factions, but genuine peace rooted in biblical truth.

And something to notice about these **exhortations** is that they are each imperatives in the present tense, which communicates continuous action. Paul didn't believe these virtues could be

achieved by some significant one-time effort. He's not asking the Corinthians to have an afternoon meeting so they could get their act together! No, if a church is going to be marked by joy, maturity, wisdom, unity, and peace, those virtues have to be constantly cultivated. They need to be consciously pursued every moment of the day. They take work! Pastor John writes, "As [believers] grow in grace they must constantly reevaluate their priorities, get their behavior in line with Scripture, and be restored to spiritual wholeness. Theological errors need to be corrected; biblical knowledge needs to be increased; sin needs to be dealt with; violated relationships need to be restored; laziness, indifference, and apathy need to be turned into energetic, devoted service" (483).

All of that takes work. And GraceLife, what it means for us is that there can be no resting on our laurels in regard to these things. The temptation can be for us, who, by and large, are not dealing with the kinds of conflicts and divisions that the Corinthians are dealing with—certainly not on a church-wide scale—the temptation can be for us to say, "Hey, we're Grace Church! We get this! We *are* doctrinally sound. We *are* of the same mind." And we're tempted to slack off and take it easy a bit. But friends, though we may enjoy spiritual peace with God and peace with one another, this is not peacetime! The peace for which we are to strive comes only through making war against our fleshly thinking and habits—only as we constantly examine our hearts and lives according to the searching light of God's Word and submissively bring our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors into subjection to Scripture.

You say, "Mike, that sounds exhausting!" Well, Paul knows that and so he appends a **promise** to all these imperatives. Look again at verse 11. He says, "and the God of love and peace will be with you." You need a motivation to devote yourselves to the constant pursuit of joy, maturity, wisdom, unity, and peace? The all-glorious, all-satisfying, consummately beautiful God of the universe will be with you. The presence of God—who is the God of all love and the God of all peace, who is your greatest treasure and brings the most enduring satisfaction—He will be with you. Charles Hodge writes, "[The presence of God] gives perfect peace, and fills the soul with joy unspeakable and full of glory. It is the restoration of the original and normal relation between God and the soul, and secures at once its purification and blessedness. He who has the presence of God can feel no want" (688).

II. Affectionate Greetings (vv. 12–13)

And so, Paul's final remarks begin with optimistic exhortations. **Second**, they continue with **affectionate greetings**, in verses 12 and 13. Paul writes, "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you." Paul has just exhorted the Corinthians to joy and unity and peace. Now he calls them to express that joy and unity and peace by an external token of affection, which he calls a holy kiss.

It was common in the Ancient Near East for members of the same family to greet one another with a kiss. We see that throughout the Old Testament from the very beginning. In Genesis 27:26–27, when Jacob steals Esau’s blessing from Isaac, Isaac calls him to himself and asks him to kiss him, as if it was customary, because it *was* customary. In Genesis 31:28, Laban speaks as if it’s a great insult that he not be allowed to kiss his sons and daughters. And there are conflicting reports in the sources, but it seems that most agree that it was most often a kiss from cheek-to-cheek. But either way, a kiss in the Ancient Near East was an expression of familial affection. And we see that persist even in Jewish culture in the time of the New Testament. In Luke chapter 7, when Jesus goes to the house of Simon the Pharisee, and the woman of ill-repute came and wiped Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair and kissed them, Jesus rebukes the Pharisee for looking down on the woman for her expressions of affection but not bringing any of his own. In Luke 7:45, He says to Simon, “You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet.” Jesus thinks it plausible that Simon should have greeted Him with a kiss, and so it shows that the practice persisted into the first century AD.

Besides expressing familial affection, the kiss also was especially common as an expression of reconciliation between family members. When Jacob and Esau were finally reconciled to one another, Genesis 33:4 says that “Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” The same was true of Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers in Egypt, Genesis 45:15. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father sees his estranged son returning home, and he runs out to meet him and, Luke 15:20 says, “embraced him and kissed him.”

And so the practice of the holy kiss in the early church was likely borne out of the concept that the church was the family of God, that they were brothers and sisters in Christ, and so expressions of familial affection were appropriate. This was especially practiced when the church observed the Lord’s Table, because that was the time when penitent sinners under church discipline were restored to fellowship in the church. And so their restoration and reconciliation to the family of God was sealed with a kiss of affection.

And so, often in his final greetings, Paul entreats the members of the church he’s writing to greet one another with a holy kiss. We see it in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and here. The kiss was a *holy* kiss, because it was an expression of affection between *saints*—holy ones, the ones who had been declared righteous in Christ. Therefore, being a holy kiss shared among the holy ones, there were no thoughts of taking advantage of the kiss for lustful purposes. But of course, the existence of phony Christians in the church always meant that something holy could be perverted into something sinful. Interestingly, the second-century apologist Athenagoras quoted an apocryphal text claiming that if the kiss was “made with the slightest ulterior motive it excludes one from eternal life” (Garland, 555). Now, obviously that’s

not biblical, but it is illustrative of the care that was taken to ensure that this truly was a holy kiss.

History tells us that the holy kiss fell out of practice around the 13th Century, and its disuse is attributed to the fact that it became an insincere, formalized act of liturgy rather than an expression of sincere affection. Familiarity breeds contempt. Things become rituals practiced by rote rather than heartfelt expressions of genuine brotherly love.

But the thing to take away here is the expression of brotherly, familial affection and warmhearted fellowship in a gathering of believers in Jesus, without distinction between male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor. To transcend all of the divisions that existed across those demographic lines was absolutely unheard of in the ancient world. Yes, you kissed your family members, but here was a group of people from all different ethnicities, classes, and social statuses rising above all of that, recognizing that none of those distinctions ultimately matters in view of the unity we have in Christ! And so they expressed that unity in a kiss of affection.

And while we are not bound to express affection to one another in precisely the same way as was culturally appropriate in the first century, we *are* bound to express our brotherly love to one another in the family of God in ways that are appropriate. In some instances, it's a firm and sincere handshake. In others, a sincere embrace. The manner in which affection is expressed is less important than the reality of sincerely expressing love and affection to one another. You hear it in this very letter, in 2 Corinthians 6:11: "Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide!" Chapter 7 verse 3: "You are in our hearts to die together and to live together!" I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Philippians in Philippians 1:7–8: "I have you in my heart! ... For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus!"

This *affection* of Christ Jesus ought to mark those of us *in* Christ Jesus. This union with Christ that we share in is so transcendent that it extends to people we've never even met. And we see that in verse 13, where Paul says, "All the saints greet you." Now, Paul could mean all the saints in Philippi, where he was writing from, or in Macedonia, which would have included Thessalonica and Berea as well. But I'm inclined to take "all the saints" as a reference to all believers everywhere, especially because of the parallel in Romans 16:16 where the call for a holy kiss is followed by, "All the churches of Christ greet you," which definitely has a universal overtone to it.

But either way, Paul is saying that even though the Corinthians have never met these other believers, they are united to one another based upon their union to Christ—members of the same body under the direction of the Head of the church—and based on that union they send warm, hearty, affectionate greetings to their brothers and sisters. This reminds the Corinthians that there is a wider Christian community who has a vested interest in the health of their church! that they

are not alone in praying for the healing of their divisions and the purging of the church from false doctrine. It reminds them that no matter how *alone or outnumbered we might ever feel*, *Christ has His people all throughout* the world, and there's a family we've never even met whom we'll enjoy for eternity, with whom we'll worship Christ forever on the New Earth, freed from sin and death! And it reminds them that those things are true of the Christians they *have* met, in their own congregations, and that they ought to express warmhearted Christian **affection** to one another as a result of their spiritual union to Christ and to one another.

III. Trinitarian Blessings (v. 14)

Well, we have seen Paul's optimistic exhortations, and, just now, his affectionate greetings. We come now to the **third component** of his final remarks here in 2 Corinthians, and that is, number three, **Trinitarian blessings**. And we see that in the benediction of verse 14: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all."

And with this we come to one of the great verses of the New Testament. Reflecting on this verse, one commentator said, "No other Pauline letter concludes with a benediction so theologically imposing as this one" (Barnett, 618n13). Another called it "the most profound theological moment in the Pauline corpus" (Fee, 363). It is exalted for its content as a **benediction**—wishing grace, and love, and fellowship upon the beleaguered congregation in Corinth. But it is also exalted because it takes a particularly **Trinitarian** form. It is the grace *of Christ*, the love of *God the Father*, and the fellowship of the *Holy Spirit* for which Paul prays for the Corinthians. All three members of the Trinity are in plain view. And since, in verse 11, Paul just mentioned *the* God of love and peace—which is to say, the *one* God of love and peace—to mention Father, Son, and Spirit together just a few verses later (especially in an exalted benediction like this) reveals that Paul believes the one God to exist in three Persons. Paul is a Trinitarian!

But what's interesting about that is that Paul seems to be a Trinitarian without thinking much about it. He's almost subconsciously Trinitarian. The three persons of the Trinity just seem to leap from his heart to his pen. He doesn't argue for it. He doesn't say to himself, "Hmm, well, you know, mentioning the Father, Son, and Spirit so close together in the context of a formal benediction, that's going to confuse some people. They're going to wonder how there can be three who are God and yet there not be three gods. I'd better make sure I explain the Trinity here!" There's none of that! In fact, there's nothing like that in the entire New Testament, where an author formally undertakes to explain how there can be one God and *only* one God, and yet how the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, but that the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father.

All of that is taught as it were latently and spontaneously. It is the underlying assumption of the authors of Scripture. They don't argue for it; they argue *from* it, as if nothing else could be more

plain than that there is One God eternally existent in three co-equal, consubstantial, coeternal Persons. The Trinity of God is just the air Paul breathes. And that shows that, despite all the complex explanations which seek to undermine the doctrine of the Trinity, it *is* a biblical doctrine that is assumed throughout the entire New Testament as if it were noncontroversial, as if it were just expected that every Christian believed it without controversy. And I'll actually have more to say about that next time, as we take a longer look at the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine that deserves so much more time than we're able to give it this morning.

But for now, apart from the trinitarian *form*, I want you to notice the redemptive *content*. We best know the Trinity not by contemplating the metaphysical complexities of the essence of Deity, but by beholding the *work* of the Triune God in redemption. And that's what Paul latches on to. He speaks of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in what does the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ consist? Well, Paul said it back in chapter 8 verse 9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." Though Christ was rich—although in His pre-existent, eternal glory and deity He was in possession of spiritual riches whose wealth words are unable to describe—He nevertheless voluntarily and sacrificially renounced those riches, and embraced the poverty of life and death as a human being, precisely so that we who were destitute of God's favor and blessing could be enriched with the very righteousness of God Himself! Charles Hodge says that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is "the favor, the unmerited love and all that springs from it, of this divine person clothed in our nature." He goes on to say, "Everyone feels that this is precisely what he, as a guilty, polluted, helpless sinner, needs. If this glorious, mysteriously constituted, exalted Savior, Son of God and Son of man, makes us the objects of his favor, then is our present security and ultimate salvation rendered certain" (689). All our salvation hinges upon the grace of Christ flowing from the atoning work of His cross.

And the grace that comes to us in Christ is rooted in the love of God the Father. It was the love of the Father that sent Christ to the cross, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates His own love for us, in that while we were sinners Christ died for us." 1 John 4:9: "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him." It is by the love of the Father that we know the grace of Christ. And yet while the Father's love is the originating cause of Christ's grace to us, nevertheless it is not until we have been made partakers of the grace of Christ in salvation that we come to know the love of the Father by experience (which is why, by the way, the grace of Christ precedes the love of God in this benediction). It is then, Romans 5:5, that "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." It is then that we experience the love of the Father's adoption, 1 John 3:1: "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God." This is the love of the God who *is* love, 1 John 4:8, and from that love, Romans 8:38 and 39 says, we can never be separated. And if we had a thousand sermons to preach, we could

never exhaust the depths of the love of God: “To write the love of God above, / Would drain the oceans dry. / Nor could the scroll contain the whole, / Though stretched from sky to sky.”

And when we have tasted the grace of Christ and have come to know the love of God, we also are brought into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all of God’s people was the pinnacle blessing of the New Covenant—that God’s Spirit would not only be with His people but would be in His people, working in us to will and to work for His good pleasure, writing the law in our hearts, causing us to walk in His ways, illumining the glory of Christ to the eyes of our hearts so that we are transformed into that same image of glory, comforting us in affliction, strengthening us for ministry, gifting us for service, empowering us to lay down our lives for the sake of the church.

Conclusion

All of these blessings are comprehended in the boundless and powerful *grace* of Christ, the infinite and unending *love* of the Father, and the sweet, life-giving fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Truly, what more could we ask for? What better things could we wish for ourselves?

Paul prays that these blessings would be continually with all of the Corinthians. Not one in the congregation—even the yet-rebellious—was excluded from this prayer of **blessing**. And my prayer is the same for each of you. I pray that each and every last one of us would know the grace of Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. But of course, those blessings are all wrapped up in Christ, so that union with Him is the only way to lay hold of them. And repentance and faith is the only way to be united to Him. {Refer to audio for Gospel presentation. }

And for my brothers and sisters: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”